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Lockstep and Dance: Containment & Resistance in African American Men's Lives and Representations of Them

by

Linda G. Tucker

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Lockstep and Dance: Containment and Resistance in African American Men's Lives and Representations of Them," submitted by Linda Tucker in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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September 21, 2001
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Dedication

For Russ

Who suggested I should, insisted I could, and put up with me while I did.
And yes, you always got the proportions right.

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Abstract

This dissertation is organized around the central thesis that, in the absence of one codified structure, the institution of slavery, which produced a subordinate population that could be controlled and exploited in the interest of preserving white Americans' place in the social, economic and political strata, the United States structured a carceral network to take its place. That carceral network consists of actual penitentiaries as well as other, less-obvious disciplinary sites and mechanisms. The dissertation's theoretical framework is informed by Foucault's discussion of the Panopticon as the architectural metaphor for a disciplined society. Each of the four chapters explores, on the one hand, the ways in which particular sites and mechanisms are shaped by hegemonic images of Black masculinity, and on the other hand, the ways that Black men contest the containment wrought by the ways that white America mobilizes such images. Chapter One investigates a dynamic of containment, performance, and resistance vis-à-vis Louis Althusser's models of Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses and the complimentary theory that John Edgar Wideman develops in his non-fictional narrative *Brothers and Keepers* (1984). Chapter Two looks at African American men's use of rap music as it pertains to the making of effective histories. Chapter Three locates contemporary representations of Black male athletes in relation to white lore cycles generally, and blackface minstrelsy and lynching rituals specifically. The fourth and final chapter examines the ways in which Black men employ memory and storytelling to 'get over' in their day-to-day lives. Finally, the conclusion brings together unresolved questions to gesture toward a critical approach that stands to enrich future studies of Black men's lives and cultural productions.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
1. "Little Theoretical Theatres": Liberating Voices and the Show Down in the Big House	32
2. "Holler if Ya Hear Me": Black Men, (Bad) Raps and Effective Histories	86
3. Black Balled: Basketball and Representations of the Black Male Athlete	139
4. Getting Over, Making Do: Storytelling, Memory and the Dailiness of Black Men's Survival	186
Conclusion	236
Works Cited	247

Introduction

From the point of view of the Afro-American experience, imprisonment is first of all the loss of a *people's* freedom. The questions of individual freedom, class freedom, and even of human freedom derive from that social imprisonment. From this point of view, American society as a whole constitutes the primary prison.
-H. Bruce Franklin

I

Scholars of African American literature and culture frequently quote the poignant lines with which W.E.B. DuBois opens the second chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,--the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea" (16). The frequency with which African Americanists have employed, and continue to employ, DuBois' words to capture the importance of race throughout the twentieth century suggests that the 'problem of the color-line' continues to shape the social, cultural, and political landscapes of the United States in ways that remain disturbingly unchanged. As John Edgar Wideman, in his 1990 introduction to the Vintage edition of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), writes:

> Given the level of "thinking" about race in the early 1900s—when white supremacy was the unquestioned credo of civilized men, when Europe was dividing Africa, Asia, and the islands of the sea into colonial preserves, ruthlessly crushing indigenous political opposition, subduing or eradicating surplus native populations, when blacks in the United States possessed no rights a white man was bound to respect—it's a miracle that DuBois could conceive, let alone publish, the positive vision *Souls* distilled from this chaos. (xiii)

I began this project during the final decade of the twentieth century marked by the Los Angeles police department's beating of Rodney King, revelations of racially-motivated corruption and acts of brutality in police departments in New York and Philadelphia, the political exploitation of Willie Horton, O.J. Simpson's fall from

grace, hostility toward and efforts to censor rap music, worsening economic and social conditions in inner-city neighborhoods, and unprecedented levels of unemployment and rates of incarceration for Black men. Such events and changes suggest that racial hierarchies in the United States and the multiple forms of violence they enable remain as central to the nation's organization and identity as they were a century ago. I am inclined, therefore, to rephrase Wideman's statement to suggest that, given what we know about the level of 'thinking' about race in the early twentieth century, it is deeply disturbing that, nearly one hundred years after DuBois wrote those prophetic words, there remain critical, political, and social justifications for projects like mine. That is, given all that has been done to, done by, said about, and said by African Americans since *The Souls of Black of Folk* was published, it seems that we should be both ashamed and shocked that there remain grounds on which to argue not only that the problem of the color line still existed at the end of the twentieth century, but that it remains one of the major problems of the twenty-*first* century as well.

Or perhaps we should just be ashamed. A glance backwards suggests that in the absence of one codified structure—the institution of slavery, which produced a subordinate population that was controlled and exploited in ways that protected the place of white Americans in the social, economic and political strata—another structure, the penal system, arose in its place. As Leon Higginbotham, in *Shades of Freedom: Racial Politics and Presumptions of the American Legal Process* (1996), argues, the United States

> was founded explicitly, prospered implicitly, and still often lives uneasily on the precept of black inferiority and white superiority.

> Indeed, that precept helped to legitimize slavery in America and served to justify the segregation of African Americans in this nation long after slavery had been abolished. (8)

Lee Baker makes a similar argument in *From Savage to Negro: Anthropology and the Construction of Race, 1896-1954*, when he writes:

> From the mid-nineteenth century on, science provided the bases for the ideological elements of a comprehensive worldview summed up in the term *race*. Audrey Smedley contends that the cultural construction of race only reached "full development in the latter half of the nineteenth century," when "the legal apparatus of the United States and various state governments conspired with science to legitimize this structural inequality by sanctioning it in law." (17, original emphasis)

After emancipation, white America devised various methods of managing the social, economic, and ideological blows that ensued. Whereas during slavery, slaveholders controlled slaves through punishments that emphasized their control over Black bodies and included whipping, poor diet, and hard work, after emancipation white Americans devised other methods of signaling their control over Black people. The 'Black Codes,' for example, circumscribed the mobility of Black people in literal and economic terms, and spectacularly violent lynchings of Black men reminded both Blacks and whites that the theoretical effect of emancipation—racial equality—would be actively resisted in practice.[1] Such methods of containment and discipline were the

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[1] The term "Black Codes" refers collectively to a set of laws enacted between 1865 and 1866 in the southern states. According to Higginbotham, they were "designed to regulate the lives of the southern African-American population. These black codes were principally aimed at maintaining the inferior and subordinate status of the newly freed African Americans, especially through labor relations" (232 fn36). Leon F. Litwack, in "Hellhounds," a chapter in the coauthored *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (2000), notes that prior to emancipation lynching "had served as a means of extra-legal justice in the Far West and the Midwest, and most of the victims had been white, along with numbers of American Indians, Mexicans, Asians, and blacks (13). After emancipation, however, lynching and the horrific rituals of torture that accompanied it became "exclusive public rituals of the South, with black men and women as the principal victims" (13). Litwick also notes the irony underlying lynching, the most violent of the methods by which whites sought to reinforce their own superiority, when he writes: "Some thirty years after emancipation, between 1890 and 1920, in response to perceptions of a New Negro born in freedom, undisciplined by slavery, and unschooled in proper racial etiquette, and in response to growing doubts that this new generation could be trusted to

precursors to the more subtle disciplinary methods with which this dissertation is concerned.

H. Bruce Franklin, in *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (1989), traces the criminalization of African Americans to the Thirteenth Amendment to the constitution that abolished what he calls 'the old form of slavery.' Amendment XIII reads "*Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction*" (qtd in Franklin 102, original emphasis). As a consequence of Amendment XIII, as of December 1865, a person could legally become a slave in the United States if s/he was defined by one of the states, or the federal government, as a criminal (Franklin 101-102). Accordingly, Franklin notes, for all intents and purposes, emancipation did not end slavery in the United States. Rather, only the form, not the function, of slavery changed (101). David M. Oshinsky, in '*Worse Than Slavery': Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (1996), notes the perverse manner in which emancipation rendered African Americans more vulnerable as freed people than as slaves (29). As Oshinsky explains, the black population "now faced threats from two directions: white mobs and white courts. Like the Ku Klux Klan, the criminal justice

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stay in its place without legal and extra-legal force, the white South denied blacks a political voice, imposed rigid patterns of racial segregation (Jim Crow), sustained an economic system—sharecropping and tenantry—that left little room for ambition or hope, refused blacks equal educational resources, and disseminated racial caricatures and pseudo-scientific theories that reinforced and comforted whites in their racist beliefs and practices. The criminal justice system . . . operated with ruthless efficiency in upholding the absolute power of whites to command the subordination and labor of blacks. But even this overwhelming display of superiority did not afford white southerners the internal security they sought or relieve their fears of '*uppity,*' '*troublesome,*' ambitious, and independent-minded black men and women who had not yet learned the rituals of deference and submission. . . . In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, two or three black southerners were hanged, burned at the stake, or quietly murdered every week" (12).

system would become a dragnet for the Negro. The local jails and state prisons would grow darker by the year" (29). Clearly, the redefinition of Black people as 'free' was the impetus to the ideological redefinition of them as a race of criminals (Franklin 101).

The redefinition of Blacks as criminals provided the foundation for a racialized system of containment in the United States in the form of what Michel Foucault calls a "carceral network" and what I refer to in this dissertation as a prison-writ-large. A carceral network is a complex ensemble in which the institution of a prison is but one of many components that deprives people of liberty. In addition to "the institution of the prison, with its walls, its staff, its regulations and its violence," a carceral network "combines in a single figure discourses and architectures, coercive regulations and scientific propositions, real social effects and invincible utopias, programmes for correcting delinquents and mechanisms that reinforce delinquency" (*Discipline* 271). A carceral network functions in a fourfold manner. First, it makes use of the prison as an element that signifies a society's power to discipline its citizens. Second, it produces a "penitentiary 'rationality'—the element of auxiliary knowledge" that provides a base of support for the society's use of the prison as a disciplinary mechanism. Third, it introduces into a society criminalities of the sort that the prison is supposed to control. Finally, its various sectors reproduce the criminalities necessary to ensure the continuity of the system of control and containment (*Discipline* 271). In the United States, a prison-writ-large controls the bodies, psyches, and images of African American men through a system of discipline and punishment informed by historical methods of containment through

criminalization. The prison-writ-large grows out of constructions and representations of Black men as criminals and delinquents, which are reproduced in various social, political, and cultural settings. The ideological effects and material forms of such constructions, representations, and reproductions reinforce racial hierarchies and perpetuate the oppression of African American men in ways that I will discuss in general terms here and in more specific terms throughout the dissertation.

The extent of Black men's involvement with the penal system generally, and their disproportionate incarceration in prisons specifically, are important examples of Black men's containment in the prison-writ-large in the United States. For instance, Jerome Miller, in *Search and Destroy: African-American Males in the Criminal Justice System* (1996), cites a 1991 study which showed that "*nearly one-third of all the young black men (ages 20-29) living in Los Angeles County had already been jailed at least once in that same year*" (5, original emphasis). Such figures suggest that the majority of young Black males in Los Angeles "could expect to be dragged into one or another of the county's jails, detention centers, camps, or prisons as they traversed the years between adolescence and age 30" (Miller 5). These statistics tell a story that is not confined to the West coast. The 1990 Washington D.C.-based Sentencing Project reveals that "*on an average day in the United States, one in every four African-American men ages 20-29 was either in prison, jail, or on probation/parole*" (Miller 7, original emphasis). The 1995 Sentencing Project reported that 32.2 percent of young Black men, as compared to 6.7 percent of young white men, are entangled at some level with the penal system (Davis 267). This means that 827,440 young Black males are "under the supervision of the criminal

justice system, at a cost of $6 billion per year" (Davis 268). On the basis of these and other 'one-day-count' studies, Miller concludes that "approximately 75% of all the 18-year old African-American males in [Washington D.C.] could look forward to being arrested and jailed at least once before reaching age 35. The lifetime risk probably hover[s] somewhere between 80% and 90%" (7). In 1994 the United States Department of Justice reported "the incarceration rate among blacks was almost six times that of whites. Sixty-five percent of prison inmates belonged to racial or ethnic minorities in 1991, up from 60 percent in 1986" (Jacobson-Hardy 10-11). Statistics such as these make explicit the extent to which the penal system functions as a means of controlling and containing Black men in the United States. The statistics also suggest the presence of a "penitentiary rationality" that generates overwhelming public support for the extraordinary expenditures required to maintain such high levels of incarceration. Indeed, it was estimated that in 2000 the penal industry would cost in excess of $40 billion a year (Davis 268).[2]

This "penitentiary rationality," or base of public support, a second component of a carceral network, is attributable to public blindness with respect to racist social, cultural, and ideological maneuvers that structure the prison-writ-large. Such blindness, according to Wahneema Lubiano, results from the ways that race and the operation of racism function "as a distorting prism that allows [the United States'] citizenry to imagine itself functioning as a moral and just people while ignoring the

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[2] Wahneema Lubiano, in her introduction to *The House That Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain* (1997), employs the word 'public' "without a race adjective because the operation of racism is so thoroughgoing that even those individuals who are its objects are not exempt from thinking about the world through its prism" (vii). Although I do employ a race adjective, I use the term 'white America' throughout this dissertation to refer to a national consciousness that is similarly pervasive and infectious throughout the United States.

widespread devastation directed at black Americans particularly" (vii). Thus, although the desire to control and contain Black men has not abated since the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment, it now exists in tension with the political and social climates of the late twentieth century that demand conformity to 'politically correct' postures and discourage overt expressions of racism. As Angela Davis, in "Race and Criminalization: Black Americans in the Punishment Industry," explains:

> When the structural character of racism is ignored in discussions about crime and the rising population of incarcerated people, the racial imbalance in jails and prisons is treated as contingency, at best as a product of the 'culture of poverty,' and at worst as proof of an assumed black monopoly on criminality. The high proportion of black people in the criminal justice system is thus normalized and neither the state nor the general public is required to talk about and act on the meaning of that racial imbalance. (265)[3]

The tension compels the development of increasingly subtle means of achieving historically familiar, oppressive ends. In lieu of overt discussions of race that have been all but completely excised from contemporary political debates, the most significant method of criminalizing Black males is through the use of 'crime' as a metaphor for 'race.' This substitution enables the project of containing and controlling Black men by capitalizing on historical fears of Black men. Wideman is among those who call our attention to the recoding of racial fears as fears of crime. In his essay "Doing Time, Marking Race," he writes: "In the guise of outrage at crime and criminals, hard-core racism (though it never left us) is making a strong, loud comeback. It's respectable to tar and feather criminals, to advocate locking them up

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[3] Davis offers as an example the fact that "Republican and Democratic elected officials alike have successfully called for laws mandating life sentences for three-time 'criminals,' without having to answer for the racial implications of these laws. By relying on the alleged 'race-blindness' of such laws, black people are surreptitiously constructed as racial subjects, thus manipulated, exploited, and

and throwing away the key" (16). The use of crime as a metaphor for race reinforces the "penitentiary rationality" as it furthers the project of constructing Black men as a delinquent, pathological, or criminal class by representing them as dangerous and ubiquitous.

Such representations create the impression that Black men exist as "criminal" before and after individual crimes. The criminalization of a group relies on the formation of a juncture between penal and psychiatric discourses that links psychological causalities to "juridical attribution of responsibility" (Foucault *Discipline* 252). Such a juncture makes it seem plausible, possible, and wise to exploit the target group's life experiences and cultural productions and to represent them as having inherently criminal traits. As Foucault puts it,

> [a]s the biography of the criminal duplicates in penal practice the analysis of circumstances used in gauging the crime, so one sees penal discourse and psychiatric discourse crossing each other's frontiers; and there, at their point of junction, is formed the notion of the 'dangerous' individual, which makes it possible to draw up a network of causality in terms of an entire biography and to present a verdict of punishment-correction. (*Discipline* 252)

Individuals who are members of a criminalized group and who commit crimes are therefore represented differently from non-delinquent offenders whose actions are viewed singularly, rather than within a context of innate criminality. In the United States, the white offender is considered to be "the author of his acts," whereas the Black male delinquent "is linked to his offence by a whole bundle of complex threads (instincts, drives, tendencies, character)" (Foucault *Discipline* 253). The recoding of crime in racially loaded ways enables it to function as what Miller calls a "rhetorical

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abused, while the structural persistence of racism—albeit in changed forms—in social and economic institutions, and in the national culture as a whole is denied" (265-266).

wink," making it possible for politicians to advocate, and to garner support for, aggressive, anti-crime agendas without having to openly acknowledge either the racist assumptions that underscore them, or the "[r]ace-baiting" that the execution of such agendas frequently entails (149).[4] The "rhetorical wink" articulates an otherwise unspeakable desire to manage white America's fear of Black men through such agendas and policies.

The effects of "rhetorical winks" are apparent in anti-crime agendas and policies that rely on images of Black men as criminals to acquire public support for actions undertaken to ensure 'safer' communities. Although the goal of making communities safer is certainly a legitimate one, Black communities are rarely among those in which such goals are realized. Indeed, more often than not, the opposite has been and continues to be true. For example, Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, in *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (1993), discuss the extent to which the United States remains a racially segregated society. They argue that the unique and unprecedented segregation of Blacks in American cities is an outgrowth of "self-conscious actions and purposeful institutional arrangements" that show few signs of change over time. Most significantly, Massey and Denton contend that the "effect of segregation on black well-being is structural, not individual" and that it "constrains black life chances irrespective of personal traits, individual motivations, or private achievements" (2-3).

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[4] One of the most striking uses of a Black man's image to criminalize Black men collectively occurred during the 1988 presidential campaign in which the image of Willie Horton, a Black man who raped and beat a white woman while on prison furlough, was exploited as a collective symbol of Black male criminality (Reed 189-190). Such uses of Black men's images perpetuate the view that, as Toni Morrison puts it, citing an unidentified William Faulkner character, "a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior" ("Dead Man" xi).

The problems of crime, unemployment, lack of education, housing shortages, and debilitating poverty that plague Black communities distinguish them from the white, middle-class communities designated as worthy beneficiaries of crime reduction efforts. Worse yet, the structural effects of segregation position the residents of Black communities as scapegoats for politicians who covertly perpetuate white fears of Black men as they mobilize support for anti-crime measures.

For example, Robin Kelley, in his essay "Slangin' Rocks . . . Palestinian Style: Dispatches from the Occupied Zones of North America," identifies South Central Los Angeles as a victim, rather than a beneficiary, of the war on drugs initiated during the so-called "age of crack" in the 1980s. Police helicopters, riot police, and small tanks became familiar sights in the community during this era. As well, fortified fencing was installed around housing projects that accommodated mini police stations while residents were required to carry identification and their visitors were routinely subjected to searches (Kelley 48).[5] Significantly, as Troy Duster notes in his essay, "Pattern, Purpose, and Race in the Drug War: The Crisis of Credibility in Criminal Justice," the war on drugs was accompanied by the largest rise in a prison population in modern history. Duster writes, "[s]ince 1980, America built more prisons and incarcerated more people than at any other time in our history. In the brief period from 1981 to 1991, we went from a prison population of 330,000 inmates in state and federal prisons to 804,000—substantially more than doubling in a single decade" (263). Further, although according to government statistics, African

[5] Duster notes other telling statistics as well. One study showed that, in 1989, African-Americans and Latinos constituted 92% of those arrested for drug offenses in New York City and in Florida "annual admissions to the state prison system nearly tripled from 1983 and 1989, from 14,301 to nearly

Americans represent only 15-20% of drug users in the United States, in most urban areas half to two thirds of those arrested for drug offenses are Black (Duster 264). Ironically, the increase in intensive, often militaristic, law enforcement activity took place at a moment when "violence among African-American males had either stabilized or was subsided" (Miller 91). In contrast, during the same period, the national homicide rate had surged because of an increase in the number of homicides committed by whites (Miller 91). By 1991 homicide rates among young Black men had risen markedly again due in part to increases in incidents of gang-related violence. The increase in homicide rates among Black men not only speaks to the failure of the war on drugs to produce safer communities, but also suggests that increased levels of violence in Black communities may be attributable to "heavy-handed criminal justice approaches to complex problems rooted in poverty, unemployment, and family breakdown" (Miller 91).

Miller elaborates on this supposition when he suggests that such violence in Black communities is likely

> birthed and nurtured in county and state-run juvenile halls, camps, detention centers, reform schools and prisons with gang leadership routinely confirmed in the same facilities. All these factors have fed a culture of violence on the streets of California's cities and towns, wherein the ethics of the street among certain minority groups is indistinguishable from the rules of survival in a maximum-security correctional institution. (91)

This seems entirely plausible since incarceration is an important means by which a society fabricates and reproduces the conditions necessary for the successful construction of a delinquent class. Although the purported function of the penal

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40,000," a rise that Duster argues is a "direct consequence of the War on Drugs because well over two-thirds of these felonies were drug related" (264).

system is to eliminate crimes and to discipline the behavior of those who commit them, in fact, it reproduces delinquents in ways that detract attention from crimes that a society prefers to hide, accommodate, or supervise through other means (Foucault *Discipline* 277). For instance, prisons offering inmates "useless work, for which they will find no employment" on the outside set the stage for inmates to commit crimes upon their release in an effort to provide food, clothing, and shelter for themselves and often a family. Second, inmates who are subjected to violent constraints and arbitrary abuses of power within prisons come to view laws and authority figures such as judges and police officers with a deep sense of distrust (Foucault *Discipline* 266). Third, prisons that allow inmates to have some degree of contact with one another enable, indeed encourage, the formation of groups whose members are loyal to one another and willing to participate in future criminal acts together (Foucault *Discipline* 267). Finally, prisons produce future pools of delinquents by indirectly forcing offenders' families into destitution (Foucault *Discipline* 268). In these ways, prisons produce delinquents by schooling offenders to regard society as their enemy, thus shaping a peculiar "morality" that drives inmates to devise clever, and often violent, ways to "escape the rigours of the law" and the abuse that often accompanies its enforcement. By creating consensus as to the criminality of a particular group and by reproducing the conditions necessary to maintain that consensus, a society acquires a base of support for any means by which it attempts to exploit, to control, and/or to annihilate the group in question.

Further, delinquency functions within a carceral network as a "form of illegality that seems to sum up symbolically all the others, but which makes it

possible to leave in the shade those that one wishes to—or must—tolerate" (Foucault *Discipline* 277). The penal system serves an important political function by rendering certain types of crimes and transgressions hypervisible and scapegoating the people who (allegedly) commit them. In the United States, the sorts of crimes that receive this type of attention include drug possession (particularly crack cocaine), trafficking, gang violence, and other forms of street crime. An overwhelming focus on street crime in Black communities aids in the criminalization of Black men. In contrast, crimes that take place beyond the media's gaze, and crimes purportedly committed for the 'social good,' seem, at best, less violent and less damaging to the general health of the nation, and, at worst, necessary parts of making communities safer. The sorts of crimes that I am referring to here include insider trading, bank fraud, anti-trust offenses, and in Black communities police surveillance, harassment, and brutality, and other violations of civil rights supposedly undertaken in the interest of 'law and order.' Randall Kennedy, in *Race, Crime, and the Law* (1997), expresses doubt about the extent to which racial prejudice influences the types of crimes that generate the most public outrage and disgust. Although he does not dismiss the influence of racial prejudice entirely, he argues that

> [d]ifferences in public response are most likely attributable to differences in the nature of the offenses in question as opposed to differences in the racial demographics of perpetrators. . . . [I]t seems to me likely that differentiation between street and white-collar crime is rooted in a sensible perception that the harm wrought by the former is more personally threatening than harms wrought by the latter. (fn. 14)

I would concur with Kennedy's subsequent suggestion that most people would rather be robbed by computer, than at gunpoint. However, Kennedy's supposition fails to address public apathy toward crimes that are perceived as very personally threatening

by victims who fit a very clear racial demographic, namely that of Black men.[6] When certain crimes that are as invasive and violent as those which actually do generate public outrage and disgust fail to do so when the *victims* are primarily Black men, it is more difficult to discount racial prejudice as a factor that shapes public responses. Nonetheless, as Toni Morrison notes, "since blacks and criminality are understood to go hand in hand, the outrage that should be the consequence of lawless police is muted" ("Dead Man" xxii).[7] I daresay that if white people were subjected to the same, routine violations of civil rights and liberties, police harassment, and brutality as Black men, we would see considerably more outrage and disgust about such violations than we do now. However, thanks to politicians, the media, the tone and execution of the war on crime and drugs in Black urban communities, the drastic deterioration of conditions and opportunities in the post-industrial inner city, and, admittedly, some of the actions and cultural productions of Black men themselves,

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[6] George Lipsitz, in his essay "The Greatest Story Ever Sold: Marketing and the O.J. Simpson Trial," discusses the ironic public response to LAPD Detective Mark Fuhrman's testimony during the trial. Lipsitz writes: "Rather than expressing anger that a police officer had compromised an important murder case by lying in court and by boasting about breaking the law, media outlets and callers to talk shows largely adopted the prosecution's line of argument, treating Fuhrman like an unsuccessful character whose part had to be written out of the show. They admitted that Fuhrman was a 'racist,' but contended that his racism was personal and had nothing to do with the widespread practices of the Los Angeles Police Department (witness Chief Gates) or the prosecutor's office" (22). In contrast, Johnnie Cochran was publicly maligned for playing the so-called 'race card,' and his strategy used as evidence of the general "propensity of Black people to 'blame' their problems on racism." In this trial, Fuhrman was, at best, seen as an offender, whereas Simpson, his lawyers, and even the Black members of the jury that acquitted him were represented as delinquents whose actions and strategies were compelled by a supposedly innate biological propensity to respond to stimuli on the basis of their emotions and instincts, rather than on the basis of logic or intellectual reasoning (Lipsitz 23-25).

[7] Morrison elaborates further on this point when she writes: "For middle and upper classes the police are the praetorian guard. They are the men in blue who riot for them, in place of them, who are implacable in their pursuit of the disorderly, the unhoused and the criminal, and who sometimes have to violate law to enforce it. For whites to consider police corruption as systemic rather than occasional is to place themselves in the untenable position of being shield *by*, rather than protected from, chaos. The desire for protection from blacks at all costs encourages recklessness and the weapon of choice may be an arrow tipped with poison at both ends" ("Dead Man" xxi).

the causes and effects of these crimes have been mapped onto the image of the Black male.

II

This dissertation is concerned with the ways that Black men are represented and represent themselves within four realms: actual prisons; rap music and the contexts in which it circulates; the arena of professional basketball; and fiction written by Black men. I contend that ongoing efforts to criminalize Black men through representation are apparent in the covert methods by which white America perpetuates such images. I draw on examples from each of the four realms to examine, on the one hand, the ways that white America 'manages' its fear of and fascination with African American men, and, on the other hand, the myriad ways that Black men respond to and often resist the containment wrought by efforts to perpetuate the image of Black males as a delinquent class. In short, this dissertation demonstrates that the import of Amendment XIII is alive and well today and that it is apparent in a form that I refer to as a 'prison-writ-large.'

As the title of my project suggests, this dissertation is concerned with representations of African American men specifically. I hope that my decision to focus on Black men will not be taken as a suggestion that African American women's experiences are any less significant or oppressive, or that their cultural productions are any less rich than those of Black men. Rather, my concern is to make visible the very specific nature, function, and effects of contemporary representations of Black males as criminals in relation to the preservation of racial hierarchies in the United States, and Black men's efforts to negotiate their places within them. In this regard, I

follow Robyn Wiegman's lead in *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* where she departs from what she calls "feminism's moratorium on reading the category of men as anything other than patriarchal privilege" (82). Wiegman issues a caution against locating Black men within a homogenized category of the patriarchal masculine. She admits that, in the first stages of the contemporary women's movement, "the assumption of masculinity as an undifferentiated position aided feminism's articulation of its own political subjectivity" (82). However, she asserts that to continue to uphold an undifferentiated view of masculinity is to assume that African American men have had, and have, full access to the power and agency associated with that undifferentiated notion of masculine authority (83). The assumption that African American men have not had, nor do they have now, full access to masculine authority underscores my explorations of each realm of representation.

The emphasis in each chapter is on the ways that Black men use language, music, their bodies, sport, the media, memory, and storytelling to respond to the criminalization of the Black male image. All of the texts and figures on which I focus invite, and sometimes force, audiences to rethink the uni-dimensional images of Black men that structure the prison-writ-large. I engage in close readings to locate resistance where I see it and endeavor to make that resistance legible and audible. The words, thoughts, actions, and images that I identify as being resistant differ markedly in the ways that, the extent to which, and the moments when they challenge, expose, or otherwise speak to the criminalization of Black men's images. A peculiar tension between resistance and complicity is often apparent in the examples that I discuss. I

am cognizant of the contradictions that generate this tension and complicate each realm, each text, and each figure, as well as my readings of them. Although I gesture toward and address such contradictions when they poke their unruly heads through what would otherwise be holes in my argument, for the most part my focus is less on contradictions and complicity, and more on coherence and resistance in Black men's lives, and their own and others' representations of them. My focus does not derive from a desire to locate an essence of resistance in Black men's lives and cultural productions. Nor does it derive from a desire to negotiate Black men's "release from the complications of the real world," or to establish for them (or myself) an alibi with respect to behaviors that further the oppression of others (Ellison "World" 121). Rather, my decision to direct my primary focus to coherence and resistance is an effort to avoid perpetuating an historical tendency to assume from the outset that "[i]llogic, contradiction, [and] deception are understood to be fundamental characteristics of blacks" (Morrison "Dead Man" x-xi). This tendency, as Morrison points out in her reading of the role of race in the O.J. Simpson trial, has the unfortunate effect of situating Blacks "outside 'reason' in a world of phenomena in which motive or its absence is sheltered from debate" (xi). In this project, I am particularly sensitive to the ways that this tendency comes dangerously close to being played out in public and critical responses to controversial figures such as Tupac Shakur and Dennis Rodman. Although I agree that it is critically important and responsible to discuss the contradictions that shape the environments in which Black men and their cultural contributions function and circulate, I think it equally important to do so in ways that do not make it seem as though the essence of the men,

their productions and their performances is contradiction, but instead open the door to the possibility that what sounds like chaos may, with some effort, be excavated in ways that reveal its coherence (Morrison "Dead Man" xi). I believe my focus to be necessary for what I consider to be first and foremost a project of discovery and recovery, as my intent is to engage with, as I direct critical attention to, representations of figures and texts that have been misread or not read at all, or otherwise exploited to further malign the Black male image in the United States.

James Baldwin, in *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (1985) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963) captures the relationship between oppression, resistance, and culture in ways that guide my approach to this project. Baldwin acknowledges the weight of racial terror and contends that African Americans, to cope with such terror, have approached its sources with "ruthless cunning, an impenetrable style, and an ability to carry death, like a bluebird, on the shoulder" (*Evidence* 78-79). In Baldwin's view, Black people have always risen to the demands that white racism imposes on them by making 'bricks without straw,' which is another way of saying that they have found ways to inscribe their humanity on the face of white American culture in spite of, and to some extent because of, whites' efforts to dehumanize them (*Evidence* 104). Baldwin acknowledges that Black people may never be able to usurp white power. Nonetheless, in *The Fire Next Time*, he encourages African Americans to generate chaos within the social order because progressive change stands to emerge when chaos is generated within public, as well as private, realms (88). As he puts it so eloquently, the "Negroes of this country may never be able to rise to power, but they are very well placed indeed to precipitate chaos and ring down the curtain on the

American dream" (*Fire* 88). Baldwin equates 'change' with 'renewal' and suggests that the most significant changes are likely to occur below the surface in what Ellison would term 'the lower frequencies' of culture. As he puts it, "[t]o accept one's past . . . is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it" (81).

To excavate the ways in which a past has been used entails certain critical risks to which Ralph Ellison points in his essay "The World and the Jug" (1964). In his well-known essay, Ellison takes Irving Howe to task for reducing Black people and Black writers to mere objects of oppression for whom unrelieved suffering is the experience with which they are most familiar, and therefore the subject with which they are most consumed. Ellison also admonishes Howe for failing to see that African American life is not always a burden, but rather a discipline, and that Black people are more than products of the 'sociopolitical predicaments' that characterize the American experience. As Ellison puts it,

> American Negro life . . . is, for the Negro who must live it, not only a burden (and not always that) but also a discipline—just as any human life which has endured so long is a discipline teaching its own insights into the human condition, its own strategies of survival. There is a fullness, even a richness here; and here *despite* the realities of politics, perhaps, but nevertheless here and real. Because it is *human* life. (112, original emphasis)

As Ellison reminds us, "blacks are products of the interaction between their racial predicament, their individual wills, and the broader American cultural freedom in which they find their ambiguous existence" (113). He stresses, therefore, that it is incumbent on critics to remember that people with black skins retain their humanity, forge values unique to their experiences, and work towards freedom in a multitude of ways and to respond with such pluralities in mind.

I start, then, from the assumption that Black men have a certain degree of agency over their lives and cultural productions, bearing in mind the critical role that resistance has played in shaping African American cultural and literary traditions. The tension between complicity and resistance leads me to locate resistance on a continuum ranging from the most direct, overt, audible, legible, intelligible, and visible forms of resistance to the least so. The points on such a continuum do not correlate to the efficacy of a resistant act. Indeed, I am uncertain how, or even if it is wise, to compare the effects of the most elusive forms of resistance with those of the most overt. To evaluate such efficacy would require us to articulate the outcomes with which we associate resistance. It would require us to answer questions such as, how many people need to benefit before an act of resistance is deemed effective? How long do the benefits, perceived or real, need to last? How can we know when, or in what ways, 'change' has taken place? These are questions that the continuum itself cannot answer. But what the notion of a continuum of resistance can do is remind us that there are many ways of understanding and engaging in the world as political subjects as it directs us to the contradictions, consistencies, continuities, heartbreak, anger, hate, and love that inform the ways that Black men negotiate the often fine lines between containment and freedom, complicity and resistance that shape their and, in fact, all of our lives.[8] Above all, this project is motivated by a desire to better

[8] One of the most recursive images throughout Wideman's fictional and nonfictional work has to do with the sound of ice cracking. In *Brothers and Keepers*, for instance, Wideman writes: "Heartbreak is the sound of ice cracking. Deep. Layers and layers muffling the sound" (Wideman 97). I became cognizant of the significance of that image vis-à-vis the nature of resistance generally, and Black men's resistance specifically, in November of 1997 when my partner and I embarked on a road trip through the Canadian Rockies. On our way home, we stopped on the outskirts of Banff at a park framed by a stunning view of the Canadian Rockies and adorned by a small centerpiece of lake. It was a cold, crisp, sunny day with a sky as clear as any that I can recall seeing. Although the ground was bare, the mountains were snow-capped and the lake was frozen. As we stood admiring the scene, we

understand how and why, despite the ubiquitous presence of the prison and its official and unofficial keepers in their daily lives, Black men from all walks of life have been, and continue to be, nothing short of brilliant, as Greg Tate puts it, when it comes to resisting and making use of "the myriad ways [they've] been fucked with" (113).

III

In the preface to *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989), John Fiske notes the ease with which theories taken from different countries can be applied across intellectual traditions and areas of study. As he puts it so succinctly, "theories travel well, with only a touch of jet lag" (ix). Although Fiske refers specifically to the mobility of theory in geographic terms, I think it useful to extend his point about nomadism to refer to a form of scholarly and intellectual praxis that tests the boundaries between critical approaches to reading, thinking about, and writing about the complex world in which we live and work. Although I did not think of it as theoretical nomadism until recently, my critical tendencies have always been informed by this critical praxis. As an undergraduate student, for instance, I recall grappling with Chaucer and Shakespeare through the lens of African American literary theory and cultural criticism. To their credit, my professors, whom I suspect were at times baffled by the oddities of such an approach, did their best to grapple with the essays that I turned in. My intention was never to buck tradition or to make

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became aware of what sounded like gunshots in the distance. Startled, we listened more carefully and soon discerned that the sounds that we were hearing were not gunshots but rather the sound of the deepest layers of ice on the lake cracking. We stood, mesmerized by nature's ventriloquism, marveling at how the lake's smooth, opaque surface muffled the chaos and noise beneath its frozen veneer. The sound of the ice cracking resonated for me because of the extent to which Wideman invokes it throughout his work. He does so, as I realized that day, because the sound, deceptive in its violence, oblique in its location, startling in its effect, captures the nature and function of the social, cultural, and political layers that give rise to, as they distort, the varying ways in which Black men respond to containment within the prison-writ-large of the United States.

some kind of political statement. Rather, my approach was informed by the simple fact that I had encountered African American literature and criticism well before I was introduced to that of white writers with whom English students generally become familiar much earlier in their undergraduate careers. I therefore intuitively, and without inhibition, worked from the critical perspectives that I found most enabling at the time.

A theoretical nomadic approach informs this project, albeit in a form that is less arbitrary than the one I employed as an undergraduate student. The irony of my approach today is that, as an undergraduate, brows were furrowed when I approached European texts through the lens of African American criticism, whereas now brows are sometimes furrowed because of the combinations of European critics whose work I employ in conjunction with an African Americanist project. In contrast to my early efforts at theoretical nomadism, I now take this approach with an agenda in mind. For a variety of reasons, ranging from the traditions and investments of particular disciplines to institutional and departmental emphases and politics, there sometimes exists opposition, in varying degrees, to scholarly journeys across boundaries that delineate particular fields of inquiry. For instance, there has been significant debate as to whether it is appropriate or productive to use theory by white or European scholars to talk about African American literature and culture. Yet much of the most compelling scholarly work in the field of African American literature and culture reveals evidence of theoretical nomadism. Henry Louis Gates' seminal text, *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), represents an excellent example of this point. Gates builds his theory of 'Signifyin(g)' from an African American vernacular practice by

bringing together the African god of indeterminacy, Esu Elegbara, and the African American trickster figure, Monkey, as well as theory by Lacan and Sassure to discuss one of the most important characteristics of African American rhetorical practice. As Gates writes in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self* (1987), the challenge for the critic of African American literature is

> not to shy away from literary theory, but rather to translate it into the black idiom, renaming principles of criticism where appropriate, but especially renaming indigenous black principles of criticism and applying these to explicate our own texts. It is incumbent upon us to protect the integrity of our tradition by bringing to bear upon its criticism any tool of sensitivity to language that is appropriate. And what do I mean by appropriate? Simply this: *any* tool that enables the critic to explain the complex workings of the language of a text is an appropriate tool. For it is language, the black language of black texts, that expresses the distinctive quality of our literary tradition. (xxi, original emphasis)

Michael Awkward, in his essay "Appropriative Gestures: Theory and Afro-American Literary Criticism" (1988), concurs with Gates when he is critical of those who compromise their own arguments by rejecting out of hand ways of reading and thinking that would have enriched their arguments and our understanding of African American literature (365-366). Awkward emphasizes the importance of appropriating theoretical approaches that fall outside the parameters of the African American literary tradition "in ways that will allow us to continue to further our comprehension of Afro-American texts, and to insure both their survival and their impact" (366). An important strength of the nomadic approach, then, is that it allows literary and cultural critics to make use of all sorts of texts and contexts, while it affords critics space in which to maneuver so as to represent the subjects with which we are concerned in the most provocative lights. An equally important strength is that theoretical nomadism

helps its practitioners to avoid perpetuating in thought and practice a form of literary, intellectual and academic segregation that compromises what I view as a positive integrationist, as opposed to an assimilative, trend.

This dissertation brings together what may seem to some readers an odd combination of texts and contexts, and theorists and theories, some of which are generally viewed as more contradictory than complementary. For example, although Foucault's work on delinquency and his notion of the Panopticon as an architectural metaphor for a disciplined society inform all of the chapters, in Chapter One I draw on Louis Althusser's models of Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses to theorize the relationship between power, performance, and resistance in the prison-writ-large. Whereas Foucault seems unconcerned with questions of Ideology, they are Althusser's primary focus. And although Althusser posits the materiality of Ideology, and aside from his invocation of a few examples from everyday life, he has fewer investments than Foucault in following the trajectory of specific historical developments and their affects on the lives and deaths of the condemned, the incarcerated, and the citizenry at large. I posit a connection between their work, however, because of the structural and functional similarities that I see between Althusser's models and Foucault's historical analysis of discipline and punishment. In particular, I find Althusser's work useful to my analysis of the prison-writ-large in the United States because I see resemblances between his models of Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus, Bentham's Panopticon, and the United States' prison-writ-large. I believe that there are compelling relationships between Althusser's Absolute Subject of Ideology, Bentham's disembodied figure of Panoptic power, and

the Ideology of Race in the United States on the one hand; and Althusser's interpellated subject of Ideology, the inmates in the cells of a Panopticon, and African American males on the other hand. I recognize that this combination might place my argument at risk of the 'jet leg' to which Fiske refers. I have nonetheless gone out on this theoretical limb hoping that, even if it breaks, my journey onto it will have been coherent enough in its organization, and engaging enough in its reach, to offset the critical disorientation and readerly fatigue of 'theoretical jet lag.'

Finally, integral to my practice of theoretical nomadism is my commitment to close, textual analysis of literary works and other forms of cultural production. For as enabling as I find the work of theorists such as Foucault and Althusser, I remain dedicated to the practice of drawing theory out of African American literary and cultural productions. My commitment to close reading stems from my appreciation that, as Barbara Christian puts it, theorizing by African Americans has long taken place in forms "quite different from the Western form of abstract logic," namely through the use of figurative language, stories, riddles, proverbs, and word play. Such are the means through which African Americans have engaged dynamically with questions about "the nature of life" and the "power relations of the world" (Christian 349). I subscribe to the deceptively simple definition of theory that Hortense Spillers offers when she claims that a theory is "a text for living and dying" (459). To understand theory as such, is to acknowledge that those woven into the texts to which I direct my attention in this project are every bit as sophisticated as theory with a less "imaginative" bent written by figures whom are more readily recognized and accepted as 'theorists' within the academy (459). For the theorizing that takes place in

the forms and forums that Christian and others privilege grows out of the spirited use of a rhetorical practice that is "both sensual and abstract, beautiful and communicative." Such language is woven into narratives of pain and pleasure, life and death, remembrance and survival, celebration and critique (Christian 349). I therefore pay close attention to the linguistic and structural details of the texts with which I work. From those details, I draw narratives of "living and dying" that respond to, resist, and are sometimes complicit in, the criminalization of Black males in the United States. I am committed, therefore, to practicing, as I discover and discuss, the theorizing that goes on everyday in places where a less-nomadic critical approach might not have taken me.

My primary agenda in this project is to expose and to disrupt the kind of thinking that shapes dominant representations of Black males. In all, I discuss four realms of representation in which the criminalization of African American men takes place and in which Black men respond to and resist such criminalization: incarceration, rap music and related activities, professional basketball, and the everyday lives of 'ordinary' Black men. I look at men who do not appear to have much in common—prisoners, rap musicians, professional basketball players, and Black men who live their daily lives in sites that contain by virtue of their invisibility. Despite their differences in age, vocation, class, and politics, the men with whom I am concerned share in common a place in the carceral network of the United States that is both shaped and upheld by American views and treatment of its Black male citizens. Most of the men who figure in this project seem to thrive on, indeed rely on, their ability to represent themselves as enigmatic texts. Accordingly, I undertake the

task of reading what these men have to say about, on the one hand, the prison-like structures which define so much of life for African American men, and on the other hand, how and why it is necessary and possible to break out of, or learn to function more freely within, those structures.

IV

Chapter One develops the argument initiated in this introduction, which is that the United States' carceral network, or prison-writ-large, is structured by technologies of containment, similar to those of a Panoptic prison. It argues that African American men are subject to equally effective techniques of containment that are designed to isolate them and render them silent and, depending on the context, hypervisible or invisible. Further, the chapter argues that despite the heterogeneity and pervasive presence of such technologies, they do not function absolutely as they are constantly subjected to equally heterogeneous and pervasive forms of resistance enacted by African American males. Finally, the chapter examines the tension between containment, performance, and resistance by bringing into conversation Althusser's model of Ideology, which I read as a theory of containment, and the complementary theory that Wideman develops in his nonfictional narrative *Brothers and Keepers* (1984).

Chapter Two moves away from Chapter One's more abstract emphases to focus on rap music generally, and Tupac Shakur's work and persona specifically, and to examine what Houston Baker characterizes as African American men's struggle to be heard, as opposed to being silent participants in the 'scene' of American violence. The chapter locates rap music as a potential site of resistance where artists function as

effective historians. Discussions of Rodney King's silence about his 1991 beating by Los Angeles police officers, his subsequent investments in the rap music industry, and Ice Cube's song "Who got the Camera" figure prominently in the first part of the chapter. The last part of the chapter contextualizes Tupac Shakur's work as that of an effective historian through close readings of his THUG LIFE and EXODUS 1811 tattoos. The chapter closes by locating debates about rap music within a theory that articulates the tensions between power, complicity, and resistance to which critics' responses to rap music and artists themselves call attention.

Chapter Three continues the investigation of the criminalization of Black men in the realm of popular culture. This chapter links the game of basketball to the broader 'games' in which Black men participate by finding ways to incorporate the pleasure of undisciplined sites into the closely curtailed and regimented structure of the prison-writ-large. The chapter argues that historical images of Black men as violent criminals inform contemporary responses to, and representations of, Black male basketball players. It begins with a general discussion of basketball and the ways that the sport functions as a site of containment, liberation, and resistance for Black men. Next, it contextualizes historical images of Black men as hypersexualized criminals in relation to two of the methods by which white Americans once managed their fear of, and fascination with, Black men, namely blackface minstrelsy and lynching. The next section links those images and methods, along with the dynamic of fear and desire that underlies them, to contemporary manifestations of the same dynamic in relation to Black male basketball players. As cases in point, I discuss the infamous coach-choking incident involving Latrell Sprewell, two of the Nike

television commercials featuring the 'Fun Police,' and the images and representations of the recently retired players, Dennis Rodman and Michael Jordan.

The fourth and final chapter turns away from popular culture and directs its attention to fictional representations of the everyday lives of Black men who are neither prisoners nor celebrities. It is fair to say that all of the chapters are concerned at some level with the everyday. The various mediums and media that structure our encounters with criminalized images of Black men weave such images into the fabrics of our everyday lives, thus reinforcing the criminalization of Black men in the national imagination. This chapter, however, turns to fiction to examine the ways in which Black male writers represent and theorize the daily lives of African American men whose experiences in and views of the prison-writ-large are not filtered into the living rooms of the public on a daily basis. The chapter asserts the cultural importance of such fiction by way of Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" which concerns the recovery of Black women's writing and the information that it gives us about how ordinary people negotiate and understand their lives within a racialized system of containment. Essays by John Fiske and Craig Smith concerning both the hypervisibility and the invisibility of Black males in the United States inform subsequent discussions of short stories and novels by John Edgar Wideman, Richard Wright, and Ernest Gaines. Those discussions locate storytelling and memory as survival strategies and oblique acts of resistance that shape what Michel de Certeau calls an art of 'making do' and what Geneva Smitherman calls 'gittin ovuh.'

Finally, the conclusion brings together and refocuses some of the questions that linger on the edges of each chapter. It does so by gesturing toward a critical space where studies of Black men's cultural productions benefit from our knowledge, appreciation, and consideration of what Walker calls "contrary instincts." Within such a critical space the tendency would not be, as was once the case with Phyllis Wheatley who represented freedom as a golden-haired goddess, to dismiss and to discredit Black men's representations of themselves and their cultural productions on the basis of their contradictions. On the contrary, the tendency would be to explore those cultural productions and their contradictions with a critical view clarified by hindsight concerning past responses to African American literary and cultural productions. To do otherwise, I suggest, is to risk one day discovering, as did Alice Walker of her "mothers' gardens," that the objects of our scorn were precisely those that fed the "muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant creative spirit[s]" of Black men who persist in their efforts to make the signs of their resistance and their 'roars of battle' both seen and heard in spaces that seem most "wild and unlikely" (Walker 239).

Chapter One

'Little Theoretical Theatres,' Liberating Voices, and the Show Down in the Big House[9]

"The journey home beginning and ending with the first word."
-John Edgar Wideman *Reuben*

I

In this chapter I elaborate on my claim that African American males function within a prison-writ-large structured by technologies of containment that are similar to those of a Panoptic prison. I begin by briefly rehearsing the architectural structure and technologies of containment of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. I then explain why I use the Panopticon as a metaphor for the United States as a prison-writ-large for African American males. Specifically, I claim that African American males are subject to equally effective techniques of containment that are designed to isolate them and render them silent, and, depending on the context, either hypervisible or invisible.[10] I also argue that despite the heterogeneity and pervasive presence of such technologies, they do not function absolutely as they are constantly subjected to equally heterogeneous and pervasive forms of resistance enacted by African American males. I make this argument by bringing into conversation Louis

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[9] I borrow the first phrase of my title from Louis Althusser's essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1971) which Althusser characterizes as his "little theoretical theatre" (96). I include the term in my title because so many of the forums of resistance that African American males produce function themselves as 'little theoretical theaters.'

[10] The question of invisibility may seem incongruent with the technologies of containment that operate within the Panopticon. However, as Foucault explains, although the central tower imposes on the inmates an "axial visibility," the divisions between individual cells create the condition of "lateral invisibility" (*Discipline* 200). In this chapter, I draw on Foucault's idea of "lateral invisibility" to conceptualize Wideman's feelings of alienation from his incarcerated brother and from his Black relatives. I return to the idea in Chapter Four.

Althusser's model of Ideology, which I read as a theory of containment in which the possibility for containment exists, and the theory of containment and resistance that John Edgar Wideman develops in his nonfictional narrative *Brothers and Keepers* (1984).[11] I juxtapose Althusser's interpretation of an exchange between God and Moses in Exodus: 3 with my own reading of that exchange to argue that performance of what for the moment I will call power and resistance shapes and reshapes the dynamic of containment and resistance in the prison-writ-large. I further my argument by reading Althusser's model of duplicate mirrors alongside Wideman's model of a two-sided mirror. I contend that a clearer view of the systems of containment that each of the models represents is necessary if we are to see and hear African American males' 'roars of battle' that take myriad forms in the United States' prison-writ-large.

II

> Contrary to popular belief, conventional wisdom would have one believe that it is insane to resist this [the United States,] the mightiest of empires. . . . But what history really shows is that today's empire is tomorrow's ashes, that nothing lasts forever, and that to not resist is to acquiesce in your own oppression. The greatest form of sanity that anyone can exercise is to resist that force that is trying to repress, oppress, and fight down the human spirit. (Mumia Abu-Jamal)

Stirring words from a man incarcerated in and by a nation that is ranked first in the world in terms of the percentage of citizens in its prisons (Wideman Introduction *Live* xxvi). Brave words because their author, Mumia Abu-Jamal, is an African American male who speaks history 'live from death row.' Strange words when one considers that they refer to the United States of America—a signifier to

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[11] Although the issue is one that remains open to debate, my reading of Althusser's model of Ideology as a theory of containment assumes that, before Ideology, there are subjects whose performances, actions, and interactions develop, uphold, undermine, disguise, and alter the nature and function of various Ideologies.

people around the world of a Promised Land, "a new and better world," a "fabled land of Equality, Opportunity, and Freedom for all" (Abu-Jamal Dedication 1995).[12] Mumia, a former Black Panther and an award-winning journalist, knows all too well the extent to which life for many African American males contradicts the notions of justice, liberty, and "domestic Tranquility" as the foundational principles of the United States (US Const. Preamble). On December 9, 1981, Mumia went to the aid of his brother who was being beaten by Daniel Faulkner, a white officer of the Philadelphia police force. As Mumia attempted to stop the beating, both Mumia and Faulkner were shot.[13] Faulkner died. Thereafter, what Mumia's supporters consider to have been a "farcical trial," characterized by police intimidation, judicial incompetence, and the manipulation of eyewitnesses, culminated in Philadelphia trial judge Albert Sabo sentencing Mumia to die by lethal injection (Anderson & Medina 2).[14] Mumia's political commitments and activist history notwithstanding, he admits

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[12] Hereafter, I refer to Mumia Abu-Jamal by his first name. In doing so, I follow the lead of his supporters who are to be credited for the cultural currency of the name 'Mumia.'

[13] That Daniel Faulkner shot Mumia is a fact that remains undisputed. The facts of the case make it less clear who shot Faulkner. The Commonwealth's theory is that Mumia fired first, shooting Faulkner in the back who managed to shoot Mumia before falling to the ground. Ballistic evidence did not support this theory. Although Mumia was in possession of a gun, which was taken into possession within moments after the shooting, tests showed that it had not recently been fired. Further, the Medical Examiner who removed the bullet from Faulkner found it to be a .44 caliber whereas Mumia's gun was a .38 (Weinglass 55-56).

[14] Judge Alberta Sabo has sent more people to death row than any other sitting judge in the United States (259-260). As I write this, Mumia's defense continues to run the gamut of appeals processes and it remains to be determined whether his life will be spared (Anderson & Medina 3). On October 13, 1999 Mumia's most recent appeal was denied and Pennsylvania Governor Ridge signed a new death warrant. Since then, a Federal judge issued a stay of execution because Mumia's attorneys have filed a habeas corpus petition in Federal district court (www.refuseandresist.org/mumia/index/html). Thanks to groups such as *International Concerned Friends & Family of Mumia Abu-Jamal* and the *Free Mumia Abu-Jamal Coalition*, which work on Mumia's behalf, it is possible to acquire up-to-the minute information about the status of Mumia's case. For instance, the Philadelphia-based group *International Concerned Friends & Family of Mumia Abu-Jamal* records information that people can access by calling (215) 476-8812 and maintains the website located at www.mumia.org. The New York-based group *Committee to Save Mumia Abu-Jamal* provides information via its number (212) 580-1022. A

to having been surprised when his constitutional rights were violated repeatedly throughout his trial and when his conviction was allowed to stand (*Live* xvi).[15] As he recalls about his arrest:

> I still harbored a belief in U.S. law, and the realization that my appeal had been denied was a shaker. I could understand intellectually that American courts are reservoirs of racist sentiment and have historically been hostile to black defendants, but a lifetime of propaganda about American 'justice' is hard to shrug off. (*Live* xvii)[16]

Mumia attributes his former optimistic views of the United States' criminal justice system to the sheer difficulty of seeing beyond pervasive and persuasive propaganda concerning citizens' rights and freedoms. Examples of such propaganda include the notions that everyone is innocent until proven guilty, that the law and the justice system is color-blind, that the role of the police is to serve and protect and therefore that people do not need to be protected from the police. Today, in addition to trying to get his death sentence overturned and lobbying for a new trial, Mumia is committed to exposing the illusory nature of such images through his books, *Live from Death*

New York-based group that calls itself *Refuse and Resist* also maintains an informational website located at www.refuseandresist.org. For details of the first fifteen years of court proceedings see *Race for Justice: Mumia Abu-Jamal's Fight Against the Death Penalty*. Monroe: Common Courage Press (1995).

[15] The list of violations that Mumia suffered is far too extensive to include in its entirety here. The list includes, the denial of his right to act as his own defense, his banishment from the courtroom prior to that denial which left him without defense counsel, the suppression of key evidence by the government and the police, and the exclusion of ballistic and forensic evidence indicating that Mumia could not have shot Faulkner (Weinglass 1995).

[16] Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, who served time for murders that it was later proven he did not commit, recalls going through a similar process of disillusionment vis-à-vis the American criminal justice system: "During the first few days of my confinement, I felt totally lost. My acclimation came hard and slow, as I was still laboring under the delusion that what was happening to me was merely an example of law-and-order at its usual creepy norm. I still believed that the paragons of justice around me would never actually bring me to trial on their trumped-up charges. . . . But I had little idea of the traps that were then being laid for me, or of all the underlying political elements involved. I did know that locking up black people in the morning was like bacon and eggs on toast to some of these cops, and icing one at night was equivalent to their drinking sherry in front of a warm fireplace. Still, I just could not believe that anyone would go to such extremes to frame me" (251).

Row (1995) and *Death Blossoms* (1997), his essays, and his interviews. Like many of the other African American males on whom this dissertation focuses, Mumia wants to make people see the illusions and paradoxes that dwell comfortably in the contemporary architecture of the United States. Accordingly, he continues to insist on his right to speak and to be heard.

Mumia's efforts to tell tale on the oxymoronic politics that equate justice with the state-sanctioned execution of human beings, a disproportionate number of whom are African American males, are not without risk. As John Edgar Wideman puts it so cogently in his introduction to Mumia's first book *Live from Death Row*, "[t]he first truth Mumia tells us is that he ain't dead yet. And although his voice is vital and strong, he assures us it ain't because nobody ain't trying to kill him and shut him up. In fact, just the opposite is true" (xxxii). Lest Wideman's claim seem far fetched, he reminds us of "what has happened to black men—Martin, Malcolm" who also sought to expose the delusions sketched into the United States' self-portrait by speaking about and against them (*Live* xxxiii). Mumia's insistence on speaking 'live from death row' breaches what James C. Scott calls "the etiquette of power relations" and shatters what otherwise appears to be a "calm surface of silence and consent" (8).

Wideman compares the effect of Mumia's resistance to that of the child in the fairy tale "The Emperor's New Clothes" (*Live* xxxiii). Like the child in the fairy tale, Mumia attempts to speak subversive social truths to power (Scott 8). [17] For instance,

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[17] The act of speaking social truths to power can take a variety of forms depending on the context. For instance, in an essay entitled "The Language of Home" (1985), Wideman relates an event that took place when he was a young boy living in Pittsburgh. He describes how he and a friend were looking through the window of a confectioner's shop. Wideman, in what he refers to as his "best stuck-up, siddity white folks' voice," stated loudly: "The prices here are exorbitant." He recalls the reaction of a "nicely-dressed white lady" who overheard his description of the prices and reacted as if he'd "yelled an obscenity at her." Wideman writes: "Not until years later did I begin to guess at the nature of my

Mumia's punishment for exercising his "allegedly constitutionally protected expression" of free speech was "[t]hirty days in the hole" for "engaging in the business or profession of journalism" (*Live* xxi). Mumia reflects on his punishment in *Death Blossoms*, his second book, where he writes:

> So strongly does the State object to me writing what you are now reading that they have begun to punish me, while I'm in the most punitive section that the system allows, for daring to speak and write the truth. . . . Clearly, what the government wants is not just death, but silence. A "correct" inmate is a silent one. One who speaks, writes, and exposes horror for what it is, is given a "misconduct." (1-2)

Mumia also employs the experience of a fellow inmate to illustrate the relativity of notions concerning what is and what is not considered 'threatening.' Prison authorities denied that inmate his request to acquire a typewriter for his cell on the grounds that such an instrument constituted a security risk. In response to the guard who denied his request, the inmate queried, "Well, what do y'all consider a thirteen-inch piece of glass? . . . Ain't that a security risk?" (*Live* 7). When the guard demanded to know where the inmate was going to get the glass from, the inmate responded, "From my TV!" (*Live* 7). Mumia explains such absurd contradictions in prison policies when he states "one's energies may be expended freely on entertainment, but a tool essential for one's liberation through judicial process is

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offense. I'd stolen a piece of their language. Not only was it in my possession, I also had the nerve to flaunt it in a public place, in their righteous faces. To them a colored kid with a big word instead of a watermelon in his mouth wasn't even funny. I was peeking under their clothes, maybe even shouting that they, like the emperor, weren't wearing any" (*NY Times.com* 1985). It is impossible to know whether Wideman's boyish transgression shattered the white woman's illusions of Black inferiority in any lasting way. Nonetheless, Wideman's story makes it clear that the articulation of social truths to power, whether by a small boy, a practiced writer, or a revolutionary figure like Mumia, can and does occur in places that we may not readily identify as sites of resistance. It is important in our efforts to hear the voices that articulate social truths and expose dangerous illusions that we become attuned to even the most remote and seemingly quietest locations. I expand on the importance of such a focus in Chapter Four of this dissertation.

deemed a security risk" (*Live* 7). Thus, Wideman argues, "[t]he power of [Mumia's] voice is rooted in his defiance of those determined to silence him . . . Mumia's words are clarified and purified by the toxic strata of resistance through which they must penetrate to reach us. Like the blues. Like jazz" (*Live* xxxiii).[18] As Linda Wasson puts it in her poem "Truth, can we save you before it's too late?"

> this government means not to protect the free
> do you not see that
> it is set only to annihilate any who would disagree. (318)[19]

III

The illusions about American freedom and justice to which Mumia calls attention detract attention from the cleverly-disguised racism that motivates and mobilizes regimes of discipline and control in the United States. Later in this chapter I argue that those disguises are the products of mirror-like systems of containment and illustrate my claim through close analysis of Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers*. First, however, I offer a general explanation of what I see as the relationship between the architectural design and the technologies of containment of the Panopticon, and the criminalization of Black males. I begin by briefly rehearsing the views of crime

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[18] Wideman's reference to the subversive uses to which African Americans have put musical genres such as the blues and jazz is significant. As he puts it, for African Americans, "music, speech and body movement are repositories for preserving history, values, dignity, a sense of ourselves as separate, whole" (*NY Times*.com 1985). Similarly, Houston Baker locates rap music within this tradition when he characterizes rap music specifically as "an articulate cry to the world about the insufferable poverty, relentless police brutality, and frustrated hopes of the black urban scene. . . . Rap is a young person's domain, replete with codes of speech, dress, walking, and talking in a world seen as essentially dangerous and only problematically capable of black or holy redemption" (46). I investigate the nature and function of rap in Chapter Two.

[19] Rubin "Hurricane" Carter makes a similar point in his autobiography *The 16th Round: From Number 1 Contender to Number 45472* (1974) when he writes: "Once I heard somebody . . . say that a society that condones the murder of black Americans just because they are men enough to stand up and voice their opinions against a system that does not necessarily benefit them, is not a society at all but a penitentiary with a flag" (164).

and punishment that both preceded and corresponded with the development of prisons modeled on the Panopticon. Next, I describe the architectural layout of the Panopticon and the technologies of containment that the design enables. Finally, I describe the prison-writ-large as a system of containment that reflects, in metaphoric terms, the architectural design of the Panopticon and, in literal terms, its technologies of containment. I argue that the resultant carceral network compartmentalizes African American males in ways that extend the function of actual prison cells beyond penitentiary walls.

Writer and broadcaster David Cayley, in *The Expanding Prisons: The Crisis in Crime and Punishment and the Search for Alternatives* (1998), discusses the differences between pre-and-post Enlightment views of punishment and prisons.[20] Prior to the development of prisons modeled on the Panopticon, isolation and containment were rarely employed as punishment. Instead, they were used as temporary means of containing enemies or people awaiting trials or sentencing (Cayley 140). Such limited uses of incarceration cohered with a set of ideas about the nature and function of effective punishment that were quite different from those that coincided with the increased use of incarceration as punishment generally, and the use of Panoptic prisons specifically (Cayley 141). Cayley attributes the changes to two currents of thought. The first was related to the "Enlightenment's revulsion at what the Italian philosopher Cesare Beccaria called 'the spectacle of barbarous and useless torments, cold-bloodedly devised'" (Cayley 141). Beccaria believed that

[20] As a writer and broadcaster, David Cayley has worked extensively with criminologists to produce radio shows including *Crime Control as Industry* (1990), a series of three one-hour programs, and *Prison and Its Alternatives* (1996), a series of ten one-hour radio documentaries.

punishments could not be effective if the harm that they inflicted exceeded the perceived benefit of committing the crime (Cayley 141). Bentham shared Beccaria's views and thought that there ought to exist a perfectly proportionate relationship between punishments and the offenses for which they are meted out (Cayley 141). Both believed that punishments should prevent criminals from repeating their crimes while discouraging others from engaging in similar acts (Cayley 141).

Such perspectives led to the development of punishments that most considered to be "prompt, certain, and [to] inflict the least [possible] torment on the body of the criminal" (Cayley 141). Proponents of what was thought to be a more humane approach to punishment believed that isolating criminals in prison cells would produce a rehabilitative effect. Bentham's Panopticon, therefore, met the criteria for more humane punishments because it produced a power arrangement that allowed individuals to be identified, isolated, supervised, controlled, and disciplined. It was thought that incarceration within the cells of a Panoptic prison would yield a rehabilitative effect because it left inmates with little choice but to descend into their consciences where they could reconnect with a moral feeling believed never to "entirely perish . . . in the heart of man" (Foucault *Discipline* 238). Early advocates of incarceration and isolation within cells, then, neither recognized nor acknowledged the uniquely violent nature of this now-preferred form of punishment.

The Panoptic structure itself consists of an annular building. At the center of this building is a tower from which it is possible to see everything and everyone within the structure. The area around the tower is divided into cells. The cells, or compartments, are designed to prevent inmates from seeing and communicating

either with other inmates or with the figures of power themselves. The most important characteristic of the Panoptic design is that it renders inmates isolated in the cells constantly visible from the vantage point of the central tower. In this regard, the technology of the Panopticon differs markedly from that of dungeons, which produce isolation but not constant visibility. The efficacy of a Panoptic power arrangement arises from its automation and disindividualization of power. That is, in a Panopticon, power ultimately resides "not so much in a person as in a certain, concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up" (Foucault *Discipline* 202). As I said earlier, inmates are always able to see the central tower and are therefore reminded constantly of the possible, albeit unverifiable, attention of the Panoptic eye. Theoretically, therefore, the mere possibility that the Panoptic gaze may be upon them compels inmates to behave as though it were (Foucault *Discipline* 201). The trap wrought by the unverifiable and abstracted gaze subjects inmates to two forms of punishment: isolation and constant surveillance (Foucault *Discipline* 200).

This dissertation is structured according to my contention that African American males function within a system of containment that is remarkably similar to that of the Panopticon. It is that system to which I am referring when I use the phrase 'prison-writ-large.' As the statistics that I cite in the introduction concerning the populations of United States' penitentiaries suggest, African American males are subject to containment within actual prisons at a rate disproportionate to the percentage of the population in the United States that they represent. What is less obvious is that actual prison cells are but part, albeit a significant part, of a carceral

network designed to contain and to discipline African American males within cell-like compartments. That is, beyond the walls of actual prisons, cells are replaced by a complex system of social, political, economic, and cultural compartmentalization. The compartments take both ideological and material forms and include, to name only a few, the criminalization of Black masculinity, the sanction of some activities but not others for Black males, and surveillance and over-zealous policing of Black communities. The compartmentalization that structures the prison-writ-large thereby reproduces the conditions of heterogeneity and isolation that make Panoptic spaces relatively easy to survey, to discipline, and to control. Caught within such a carceral network, African American males are subject to punishments and techniques of discipline and control which are difficult to verify yet every bit as pervasive, constant, and in some cases violent, as those employed in Panoptic prisons. Accordingly, when I distinguish between actual prisons and other forms of compartmentalization I avoid using the terms 'literal' and 'metaphoric.' I do so because the notion of a metaphoric prison suggests that the containment experienced therein is somehow less real than that produced by actual prisons. I do not deny that the lifestyles of African American males who experience compartmentalization within, say, the entertainment industry or professional sports are more appealing than those of prisoners in penitentiaries. However, I do maintain that the effects of containment within the various sectors of the prison-writ-large are in their own ways damaging to African American males' public images and psyches. This dissertation looks at just four of the many compartments that contain Black males: the prison; rap music and the contexts in which it circulates; professional basketball and the marketing of athletic, Black male

bodies and images; and the frequently overlooked realm that I call dailiness and its representation in fiction.

IV

John Fiske, in "Surveilling the City: Whiteness, the Black Man and Democratic Totalitarianism," describes the conditions that make it possible for a nation to develop and to maintain a racialized system of containment such as the prison-writ-large with which this dissertation is concerned. He identifies those conditions collectively as democratic totalitarianism and elaborates on their nature and function in the following way.[21] In environments characterized by democratic totalitarianism, disciplinary regimes disguise the presence and operation of racism in what are represented as democratic environments. The strange combination of democracy and totalitarianism is possible, Fiske claims, because "[a]ll racism is totalitarian" ("Surveilling" 5).[22] The methods by which racism is hidden in a democratic society enable a paradoxical situation in which democracy and totalitarianism coexist.[23] Such methods enable their coexistence because they make it

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[21] Fiske employs Anthony Giddens's definition of totalitarian as "an adjective that should be applied not to states themselves, but to their tendential properties that lead to a type of rule within them" (*Media Matters* 240). He lists "surveillance, intensified policing, and moral totalism" as examples of disciplinary mechanisms that operate especially effectively within democratic structures in the United States ("Surveilling" 3).

[22] In *Media Matters* (1996), Fiske lists some of the elements of totalitarian rule for which there exists considerable evidence in the United States. Two of those elements are particularly relevant to this dissertation's use of Panoptic power arrangements as a structural metaphor for the prison-writ-large: "*Focusing of surveillance* as (a) information coding, documentation of activities of the population; (b) supervisions of activities, intensified policing. . . . [and] *Terror*: maximizing of police power, allied to disposal of the means of waging industrialized war and sequestration" (240, original emphasis).

[23] Fiske refers collectively to the masks that disguise the totalitarian undercurrents of United States' democracy as the instruments of 'non-racist racism.' He defines the latter as the systems and practices that have "been developed by white-powered nations that avow themselves to be non-, or even anti-, racist. It is a racism recoded into apparently race-neutral discourses, such as those of the law, of economics, of IQ and education, of health, of housing, or of capital accumulation: each of the social domains within which these discourses operate has racially differentiated effects for which the causes

relatively easy to hide and to distort, and difficult to expose and to make people acknowledge, the loci wherein racism's damaging effects are produced. That is, for those who have the luxury of choice, sidestepping the question of racism and its draconian effects makes it possible to ignore the totalitarian undercurrents of democracy in the United States while also providing people with alibis for their blindness (Fiske "Surveilling" 4).[24]

Whereas Fiske is concerned with the specific, material conditions (i.e. surveillance technologies) that reproduce racism as Ideology and systems of containment for Black men in the United States, Louis Althusser, in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," provides a fuller and more systematic analysis of the nature and function of Ideology in more general terms, and of the ways that material conditions support the perpetual reproduction of Ideology and thus the subjection of interpellated subjects. I employ Althusser's essay to traverse the gap between, on the one hand, Fiske's more telescoped exploration, and on the other hand, the theory of containment and resistance that arises from Wideman's broader exploration of the mechanisms that structure a prison-writ-large for African American men. I do so in the following ways. First, I describe the relationship that I see between the prison-writ-large, in which various sectors reproduce racism as an Ideology, and what

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can always be made to appear non-racial" ("Surveilling" 4). Fiske considers surveillance technologies to represent one of the best examples of the instruments that mask racism and its effects in the United States. As he puts explains, the very supportability of the claim the surveillance technologies operate for a generalized public good enables them "to hide so effectively those of its operations that are oppressive, exclusionary and racist" ("Surveilling" 5). Surveillance technologies, in other words, are just one of many masks that make it possible to perform democracy in the United States without exposing its totalitarian elements.

[24] Fiske claims that the extent to which whites and Blacks perceive race relations differently in the United States is "a critical indication of the depth of the current racial crisis; the racial gap produces

Althusser calls Ideological State Apparatuses, which ensure the cohesion and reproduction of the conditions necessary to reproduce the prevailing Ideology. Second, I undertake a re-reading of an example that Althusser draws from literature (God's interpellation of Moses in Exodus) to illustrate how interpellation contains subjects. By way of that re-reading I relocate interpellation within the realm of performance. In so doing, I redefine interpellation as a performance that empowers, rather than as power itself. Althusser mentions resistance only in passing when he invokes the idea of 'bad subjects' whom "on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (repressive) State Apparatus" (101). In general terms, my redefinition of interpellation allows me to explore the nature and function of resistance as it affects and alters the reproduction of the material conditions that produce the Ideology of racism. Specifically, my redefinition enables a fuller picture of the ways that resistance factors into the dynamic of containment and resistance in which African American men are key players in the United States.

According to Althusser's model, *Ideological State Apparatuses*, or *ISAs*, represent the material forms through which racism is disguised. Althusser defines Ideological State Apparatuses as the "realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions" (73). His list of examples of ISAs includes churches, schools, the family, legal systems, political systems including parties, trade-unions, communications systems, and cultural forms including literature, the Arts, and sports. Althusser distinguishes between a unified *Repressive State Apparatus* which functions entirely in the public domain and a

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not only different life experiences of US society, but different knowledge systems, different ways of knowing what it is to be American" ("Surveilling" 4).

plurality of Ideological State Apparatuses that accomplish their work mostly in the private domain (73). Anticipating the argument that the institutions that he identifies as Ideological State Apparatuses exist in both public and private realms, he turns to Gramsci whom he claims forestalls such an argument (74). Paraphrasing Gramsci, Althusser writes:

> The distinction between the public and the private is a distinction internal to bourgeois law, and valid in the (subordinate) domains in which bourgeois law exercises its "authority." The domain of the State escapes it because the latter is "above the law": the State, which is the State *of* the ruling class, is neither public nor private; on the contrary, it is the precondition for any distinction between public and private. The same thing can be said from the starting-point of our State Ideological Apparatuses. It is unimportant whether the institutions in which they are realized are "public" or "private." What matters is how they function. Private institutions can perfectly well "function" as Ideological State Apparatuses. A reasonably thorough analysis of any one of the ISAs proves it. (75)

According to Althusser, Repressive State Apparatuses function ultimately by way of violence. Althusser locates actual prisons in his list of Repressive State Apparatuses along with the army, the police, and the courts. In contrast, Ideological State Apparatuses accomplish their disciplinary work in less overt, and therefore seemingly less violent, ways (73). The evolution of the prison-writ-large and the criminalization of Black men through particular realms of representation correlate to the United States' increased reliance on Ideological State Apparatuses to discipline African American males. A "reasonably thorough analysis" of the sort that Althusser advocates suggests that the most violent aspect of Ideological State Apparatuses may well be the duplicitous manner in which they mask their contradictory nature and the violence of their effects. The plurality of Ideological State Apparatuses in the United States are important in the context of this dissertation insofar as the violent effects of

the "realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions" are felt disproportionately by African American males (Althusser 73). Actual prisons are indisputably violent and frightening places. Yet the rapidity of their mutation into a carceral network that contains African American males without walls, and disciplines them in ways that do not require uniformed guards, produces a system of containment that may ultimately be even more violent and frightening precisely because its origins are so difficult to discern, its forms are so deceptively innocent, and its effects are so far reaching.

As distressingly absolute as containment within Panoptic structures may seem, the potential for resistance is written into the technologies of containment that operate therein. The disembodied configuration of power in the Panopticon makes integral the participation of those who are contained (Foucault *Discipline* 201). Yet, the necessity for such complicity introduces an ironic variable that poses a potential threat to the absolute control supposedly wrought by the Panoptic power arrangement generally, and to the sovereignty of its gaze specifically. Although the constant gaze may compel inmates to behave in an orderly fashion, the arrangement cannot entirely prevent transgressions; it can only punish them if they are committed and/or redefine them if they are seen. Thus, however unwillingly or unwittingly inmates reproduce the conditions of their own containment, the very notion that their complicity is at all important to the efficacy of the system implies a risk associated with their nonparticipation. The duration of this chapter offers a way to read the dynamic of containment, performance, and resistance that shapes, as it is shaped by, the carceral network in general.

In the heterogeneous compartments to which the United States' prison-writ-large gives rise, power both produces and is produced by the incessant, murmuring voices of those whom it contains. Foucault draws attention to the often-ignored, resistant noise characteristic of Panoptic systems when he calls for people to attune themselves to "the distant roar of battle" emanating from various loci within the carceral networks of modern societies (308). The racialized nature of the United States' prison-writ-large and the range of forms through which Black men express resistance make theirs an especially noisy system of containment. Some of these murmuring voices are complicit. Some are resistant. But the sounds of all keep the power arrangement that structures the prison-writ-large in a state of constant flux.

Resistant noise threatens the absolute control that theoretically exists within the prison-writ-large because it functions in a manner akin to the Panoptic gaze itself. As I have already explained, the architectural model of the Panopticon suggests that containment is produced by a single, all-seeing gaze that is emitted from an identifiable, central location. In fact, the design masks the much less orderly constellation of bodies, surfaces and lights that produce various scenes of containment in which individuals are caught (Foucault 202). The heterogeneity, double-voiced forms, and evasive nature of resistant noise give it a similarly disordered quality. The nature of resistant noise introduces additional disorder into the Panoptic arrangement, thus making it possible for individuals to hide from, to evade, to expose, to distort, and sometimes even to escape the oppressive effects of containment (Foucault *Discipline* 202). The containment that is wrought within such a disorderly system is therefore considerably less absolute than that which the

architectural design seems to guarantee. The state of flux within the prison-writ-large is the product of a perpetual battle in which the power wrought by Panoptic constellations of power, and sought through resistant sounds, is at stake. To elaborate further on the nature and function of this dynamic of containment and resistance, I turn once again to Althusser. This time, by re-reading the implications of one of his own examples, I call into question the deceptively orderly manner in which subjection is produced according to his model of Ideology and theory of interpellation.

The Althusserian model "presupposes the 'existence' of a unique and central Other Subject, in whose Name . . . Ideology interpellates all individuals as subjects" (Althusser 99). Althusser illustrates his argument by way of a story from the Old Testament. Referring to an exchange between God and Moses in Exodus 3, Althusser reads God as Ideology's Absolute or Interpellating Subject and Moses as an Interpellated subject (98-100). The exchange between God and Moses follows God's appearance to Moses in the form of a burning bush. God calls upon Moses to help emancipate the Hebrew slaves from Egypt (Exodus 3: 2-14). Moses acknowledges God's call but anticipates that Pharaoh will want to know who authorizes his mission. Althusser reports God's response to Moses in the following way:

> And it came to pass at that time that God the Lord (Yahweh) spoke to Moses in the cloud. And the Lord cried to Moses, "Moses!" And Moses replied "It is (really) I! I am Moses thy servant, speak and I shall listen!" And the Lord spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am that I am." (99)

Althusser's reference to the translation of God's name as "I am that I am" coheres with the infinite, intangible and central role that he assigns to Ideology's Absolute

Subject. He draws on this particular translation of God's name to position Him as "the Subject *par excellence*, he who is through himself and for himself . . . who interpellates his subject, the individual subjected to him by his very interpellation" (99, original emphasis). He claims that God's call compels Moses to recognize himself as "a subject, a subject *of* God, a subject subjected to God, *a subject through the Subject and subjected to the Subject*" (Althusser 99, original emphasis).[25] In Althusser's model of Ideology the power of the Absolute Subject, like God's, is uncontestable. His model does not allow for the possibility that interpellated subjects may have both the desire and the means to resist such subjection. Fortunately, the body of biblical scholarship pertaining to the very exchange on which Althusser draws, points precisely to those possibilities.

In fairness to Althusser, he admits to taking poetic license with the scriptures by paraphrasing them "not to the letter but in 'spirit and truth'" (99 fn. 20). As well, he makes no claim to any degree of expertise in biblical translation but refers to the exchange between God and Moses for illustrative purposes only. These points notwithstanding, some of the biblical scholarship pertaining to the translation of God's name leads me to propose a slight twist on Althusser's model. The change that I propose makes it conceivable that resistance is not only possible, but inevitable and perhaps integral within such a system of containment. That is, Althusser's explanation of how interpellation works is informed by only one translation of what is in fact a very enigmatic act of naming on God's part. The power structure that

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[25]Althusser offers as proof of his argument Moses' obedience to God and his ability to make the Children of Israel obey God's Commandments (99). In fact, the Children of Israel were less than eager to submit absolutely and God therefore punished them on several occasions.

Althusser defines seems less totalizing if we rethink the implications of his biblical example according to other translations of the names by which God identifies himself to Moses. The alternative translations allow me to reimagine Althusser's dauntingly oppressive model of Ideology as one in which myriad performances make it possible to resist subjection through various actions evident in material forms and contexts.

As Jack Miles notes in *God: A Biography* (1996), biblical scholars have long debated how to translate the name that God gives himself in Exodus. The *King James Version* of the Bible reports God's answer to Moses as follows: "And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you" (Exodus 3:14, original emphasis). *The Schocken Bible* reads: "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh/I will be-there howsoever I will be-there. And he said: Thus shall you say to the Children of Israel: Ehyeh/I-Will-Be-There sends me to you" (Exodus 3:14, original emphasis). Other possible translations include: " I am what I shall be, You'll find out who I am, I am what I cause to become, or I am what I do" (Miles 99). As the above examples suggest, the implications of God's name vary in accordance with the translation. Althusser invokes the translation "I am that I am" in his reading of the exchange between God and Moses. This translation represents Ideology's Absolute Subject/God as a sign of power that retains absolute control over an inescapable present. To put it another way, "I am that I am" suggests that Ideology's Absolute Subject/God *is* power. However, what happens if we translate God's name as "I am what I do" or "I am what I will do"?[26] These deceptively slight

[26] Miles acknowledges the broad range of possibilities that the latter translations yield: "God is indeed defined by what he does, defined this way even for himself. His actions precede his intentions, or at least they precede full consciousness about his intentions. . . . Even to himself, he is a mystery that is revealed progressively only through his actions and their aftermath. But the moment of his apparition

variations make it possible to read God's power as the product of His actions, almost all of which, as we see throughout Exodus, are performances of one type or another. There exists a significant difference between a figure that *is* power and a figure whose performance produces power. If power is a product of performance then it stands to reason that performance may also be empowering, the irony being that the power that contains assumes the same form as the power that resists. The re-reading of "I am that I am" as "I am what I do" makes power available to others than God by reducing God as Absolute Subject, to god as player in "the multiplicity of force relations" that collectively produce "the over-all effect" of a dynamic that we call power (Foucault *History* 93). The translation of God's name as "I am what I do/will do" therefore compels me to revise Althusser's model of Ideology as a system governed not by an abstract figure of absolute power, but rather by a series of performances that are organized around competing goals of containment and acts of resistance.

Reconfiguring what Althusser represents as the absolute power of Ideology's Absolute Subject as performance accomplishes three ends: first, reconfiguration disables the totalizing quality with which Althusser endows power; second, reconfiguration exposes the illusory premises on which oppressive exercises of power frequently rely; third, and most important, reconfiguration restores to so-called interpellated subjects the possibilities for resistance that Althusser's model at best limits, and at worst, denies them. In these ways, the notion that power is a performance and that performance is empowering reconfigures the directions in

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to Moses is obviously one of relatively intense self-consciousness. The simultaneous application of so many names to himself is, on God's part, an action of gathering self knowledge" (99).

which and the strength with which power flows and operates.[27] This is so because all performances, granted some more than others, are vulnerable to misuses and challenges, successes and failures. Reimagining power as a dynamic of containment and resistance makes it imperative that we direct our attention to the murmuring sounds of resistance that identify themselves through performances that are every bit as enigmatic as God's name and nature. I contend, therefore, that the acts of definition and interpellation that Althusser identifies as power located exclusively in the hands of the Absolute Subject are more accurately understood in the context of a fecund, more liberating realm of perpetual performance. Understood in the context of performance, definition and interpellation represent strategic moves that are intended to bring about a particular outcome although they cannot guarantee it. The dynamic of containment and resistance within which performances manifest themselves, then, may itself be understood as power which, as Foucault understands it, is neither an

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[27] Although Althusser charges God with failing to identify His nature and function clearly, I contend that God's enigmatic name accurately conveys the degree to which His power is shaped by performance. Certainly the narrative events of Exodus specifically, and the bible generally, support this notion. For instance, Althusser does not acknowledge the militant postures that God assumes throughout Exodus. He suggests that Moses, and those whose relationships to God he mediates, assume a subordinate role to God easily and without resistance. In fact, God's relationship to Israel comes about as a result of the many performances in which He engages to affirm His power. Those performances include the imposition of plagues in Egypt and the various forms in which He appears when He speaks to Moses. I contend that these represent performances, rather than just actions, because they are carefully orchestrated so as to make a very specific statement on God's part. As I see it, God has no desire to simply kill all of the Egyptians and be done with them once and for all. Rather, the various plagues and his enigmatic interactions with Moses are orchestrated so as to make the Egyptians concede to their own subordination. It is their concession that confirms God's victory, not their elimination from the game entirely. It is interesting to note that Zora Neale Hurston explores precisely this component of the Exodus narrative in *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), her rewriting of the Exodus story from an African American perspective. God's performances themselves situate Him within history, they locate His abstracted identity within lived relationships that are governed by a shared distaste for an oppressive past, a desire to exit a meaningless present and move forward into a future in which the possibility of freedom is guaranteed both by a God who is what He does and will do, and a people who fear and resent the power that underscores the performances constantly reminding them of their vulnerability in the wildernesses into which their struggles for freedom take them.

institution, a structure, or a strength with which one is endowed, but rather "the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (*History* 93).

My re-reading of Althusser's interpretation of the God/Moses exchange grows out of the contradictions implicit in the architecture of the Panopticon as they pertain to the absolute function of power. The structure of the Panopticon makes it appear as though inmates are controlled by a source located in the central tower. A "supervisor" in the central tower desires the orderly behavior of inmates. The inmates know that they are being seen. Therefore they act in orderly ways, signaling their willingness to see themselves as they are seen. Their behavior returns to the supervisor an image identical to the one that his location in the central tower imposes, thus completing the cycle through which power is organized and containment produced and reproduced in the Panopticon. To rehearse this in Althusser's terms, the inmates (subjects) are interpellated as orderly objects of information by the supervisor in the central tower (Absolute Subject) and accept the terms of their interpellation because they have no choice but to see themselves as they are seen. The tidiness of the process that I have just described becomes a bit messier when we consider that each cell has two windows. One of those windows is on the inside and faces the windows of the central tower. The other window faces outside. The window facing outside allows "light to cross the cell from one end to the other" and provides the backdrop against which inmates are seen as "small captive shadows" from the central tower (*Discipline* 200). That there are two windows does not change the fact that the prisoners can always be seen nor that they are isolated in individual cells. But the presence of a window to the

outside suggests that inmates can, from time to time, direct their gazes to places other than the central tower and imagine themselves in ways other than they are seen. Further, that the effect of the second window is to make the inmates appear as "shadows," rather than as distinct bodies, qualifies the extent to which they can be produced as "objects of information" (*Discipline* 200). As we know from the shadow puppet games that children play, the shadow, and the body that produces it, are at once conjoined and distorted through the body's performance. The potential for inmates to envision themselves other than as they are seen, along with the indistinct manner in which they appear from the point of view of the central tower, makes conceivable the idea of disorderly behavior wrought by inmates' rejection of the images of themselves presented to them.

V

The performances that mobilize the dynamic between containment and resistance keep the United States' prison-writ-large in a state of constant flux. John Edgar Wideman, in his brilliant nonfictional text *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), develops a theory of containment and resistance that enables us to better understand how this dynamic, or how power, works. In this section, I focus on the structure of Wideman's theory and the cultural contexts within which it develops. In the next section I will engage in close readings of *Brothers and Keepers* and, to a lesser degree, Wideman's short story "All Stories are True," to explore how his theory works. In keeping with a practice evident throughout much of the African American literary tradition, Wideman's theory grows out of the way that he uses language and storytelling to examine the dichotomous constructions on which the criminalization of

Black males depend. His narratives take the form of what Karla Holloway refers to as recursive or translucent texts. According to Holloway, such texts blend figurative and symbolic processes so as to produce narratives that are "reflective (mirror-like)," while their "depth and resonance make them reflexive" (55). The symbolic and figurative processes that characterize recursive texts tend to be both emblematic and interpretive of the culture that they describe (Holloway 55). The translucent qualities of Wideman's work are apparent in two ways. First, his writing is informed by African American vernacular traditions. Second, he uses vernacular forms to expose the hegemonic performances that require African American men to live double lives. The translucent qualities of his writing function, like the child who cries "You're naked!" to the Emperor, to expose the hegemonic illusions and fictions that contain Black men.

The translucent qualities of Wideman's narrative techniques are underwritten by W.E.B. DuBois' concept of a double-consciousness, or the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (DuBois 8). In his essay "The Language of Home," Wideman explains why the doubleness that underwrites many vernacular forms is so integral to his work:

> EVERYONE lives a significant portion of life below the surface. Art records and elaborates this unseen dimension. A minority culture systematically prevented from outward expression of its dreams, wishes and aspirations must evolve ways for both individuals and the group to sustain its underground life. Afro-Americans have become experts at living in a least two places simultaneously, celebrating a sensitivity to the distance—comic, ironic, tragic—between our outer and inner lives. ("Language")[28]

[28] The concept of the double-voice is central to the African American rhetorical tradition. As Gates explains in *The Signifying Monkey*, the practice of double-voicing grew out of the ways that Black people "created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms. Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from painting and

The notion that there are unseen dimensions, that is, lower frequencies, of African American lives, refers to the myriad ways in which Black people generally, and Black men specifically, develop and perform what Zora Neale Hurston calls 'feather-bed resistance.'[29] In *Brothers and Keepers*, Wideman's theory of containment and resistance takes shape in narrative spaces out of which a doubly-conscious sensibility emerges and evolves. He employs this sensibility to develop, and to make space for others to develop, multiple angles of vision with respect to the organization of, and Black men's situation within, the prison-writ-large. As Foucault tells us, although the effects of Panoptic power are homogenous, its operations are not. The efficiency of Panoptic power stems from its dispersal through a body of subjects born from a fictitious arrangement that compels them to behave as though confined to a field of constant visibility (*Discipline* 202). Wideman's writing yields a constellation of doubly-conscious perspectives that he situates in contest with, so as to expose, fictitious arrangements and representations that compel the subjection of Black men in the prison-writ-large. In the process, he creates a narrative space where African American men may see how they are seen, and where they may speak and be heard beyond malevolent systems of distortion.

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sculpture to music and language use" (Gates xiv). Gates defines double-voiced texts as "those that "talk to other texts" and notes that "Signifyin(g) is the figure of the double-voiced, epitomized by Esu's depictions in sculpture as possessing two mouths" (xxv). Gates identifies four types of double-voiced textual relations, which include tropological revision, the speakerly text, talking texts, and the practice of rewriting the speakerly (xxv-xxvi). Wideman's theory of containment and resistance is double-voiced because it "talks to" hegemonic texts that represent Black men as a race of criminals.

[29] Zora Neale Hurston, in her collection of African American folklore *Mules and Men* (1935) explains the need for such doubleness when she writes: "the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. . . . The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. . . . The theory behind our tactics: The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my

Wideman's theory of containment and resistance, and his use of vernacular forms to construct it, reflect one of his primary objectives as a writer and as an African American male. That objective is to make his way to a place that he calls 'Home.' In "The Language of Home" (1985) he offers a definition of "Home" through a discussion of his annual trip to Maine. He claims that when he is in Maine he returns most easily "home again in fiction and nonfiction, to Homewood, the black neighborhood in Pittsburgh" where he grew up and in which he situates many of his stories. In Maine, he explains, it seems easier "to borrow, to internalize for a few quiet instants, the peace of the elements at play. Whatever mood or scene I'm attempting to capture, the first condition is inner calm, a simultaneous grasping and letting go that allows me to be a witness, a mirror" (Wideman "Language"). He notes, however, that:

> This state has gradually become more accessible to me only after fighting for years to believe again in my primal perceptions, my primal language, the words, gestures and feelings of my earliest memories. At some point I taught myself to stop translating from one language to another. I've learned I can say the things I want to say using the words and telling the stories of Homewood people. The blackness of my writing inheres in its history, its bilingual, Creole, maroon, bastardized miscegenated, cross-cultural acceptance of itself in the mirror only it can manufacture. ("Language")

To Wideman, therefore, 'Home' represents how he says what he knows, what he wants or needs to say, as well as the act of saying itself. 'Home' is less a place than it is a process or strategy that guides him in his work. Wideman's journey there has not been unfettered.

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writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song" (3).

Toni Morrison, in an essay in which she also addresses 'Home,' interprets double consciousness in a manner that complements Wideman's understanding of 'Home' as a process. Morrison contends that double consciousness is most usefully understood as a strategy for liberation (12). To embrace double consciousness as a strategy for liberation is to embrace the exploration of "the inwardness of the outside, the interiority of the 'othered,' the personal that is always embedded in the public" (Morrison 12). But to see things differently, and to articulate them in ways that compel others to do the same and act accordingly, requires one's willingness to abandon their attachment to what are often very persuasive fictions. The extent to which Wideman's strategy is informed by a doubly–conscious perspective is apparent in his attention to how and why the lives of, and relationships among, many African Americans are influenced by what he calls "the impacted quality of utterance" (*Brothers* 76). The impacted quality to which Wideman refers is apparent in the words and stories of Homewood people which tend either to bury "a point too obscurely or insist . . . on a point so strongly that the listener wants the meat of the message repeated" (*Brothers* 76). As Wideman notes, "people in Homewood often ask: You said that to say what?" (*Brothers* 76). The doubleness that such a question recognizes is meaningful to those who understand that what is unsaid invests words with special meaning and urgency (*Brothers* 76). Wideman claims to have lost what he calls his "Homewood Ear" when he left Homewood and became a star basketball player, a Rhodes Scholar, and a university professor and struggled to relearn how to use it. His recovery and mastery of his "Homewood Ear" is apparent in the characteristics that he identifies as the "blackness" of his writing ("Language").

Wideman's journeys 'Home' have taught him "[that] words can be more than signs, that words have magic, the power to be things, to point to themselves and materialize" (*Brothers* 34-35). Armed with that knowledge, he turns the "blackness" of his writing into a theory that resonates with the urgency of his efforts to expose the fictions that contain Black men, as he restores clarity to their distorted images and voices.

In the author's note that prefaces *Brothers and Keepers,* Wideman locates his work within the African American vernacular tradition. He writes: "The style, the voices that speak this book, are an attempt to capture a process that began about four years ago: my brother and I talking about our lives" (ix). By way of this note, Wideman acknowledges the integral relationship that exists between style and subject matter in *Brothers and Keepers*. His elision of the preposition 'in' prior to the verb 'speak' signals to readers that he structures the narrative as a speakerly text. Henry Louis Gates defines a speakerly text as one in which free, indirect discourse is used as if it were a

> dynamic character, with shifts in its level of diction drawn upon to reflect a certain development of self-consciousness in a hybrid character, a character who is neither the novel's protagonist nor the text's disembodied narrator, but a blend of both, an emergent and merging moment of consciousness. The direct discourse of the novel's black speech community and the initial standard English of the narrator come together to form a third term, a truly double-voiced narrative mode. (xxv-xxvi)

Gates locates speakerly texts within a double-voiced, African American literary tradition that he refers to as "signifyin(g)" (xxv).[30] Wideman's use of this vernacular

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[30] Speakerly texts are one of the four types of double-voiced, or signifyin(g), texts that Gates identifies (xxv). Wideman's dedicated revisions of the tropes of descent and ascent also locate his work within the African American signifyin(g) tradition (xxv). Gates defines the signifyin(g) method of

form represents an integral part of the method by which he registers his participation in the "strategical situation" to which Butler (echoing Foucault) gives the name power. Wideman uses vernacular forms to integrate his writing into that strategical situation and to create a theory, "a text for living and dying," (Spillers 459) with which to "salvage [something] from the grief and waste" of "the tragic chain of circumstances that caused one young man to die and sent three others to prison for life" (*Brothers* Author's Note).

In particular, Wideman employs the metaphor of a two-sided mirror to theorize the ways that Black men resist representations of Black men as criminals through different kinds of performances. One of the most violent effects of incarceration within an actual prison is its imposition of "condition[s] of nonexistence" on prisoners, which provide those in the 'free world' with absolution from "responsibility for the prisoner's fate" (Wideman 188).[31] As Wideman sees it,

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tropological revision as "the manner in which a specific trope is repeated with differences, between two or more texts" (xxv). Gates notes the frequency with which tropes of descent and ascent recur in the African American literary tradition: "The descent underground, the vertical 'ascent' from South to North" (xxv). He also notes the use of "myriad figures of the double and especially double consciousness" as other examples of tropological revisions (xxv). I elaborate on Wideman's use of these tropes in Chapter Four.

[31] In *Brothers and Keepers,* Wideman relates how, as his brother Robby's appeals are rejected time and again, he feels as though the courts are intent on denying his "existence as being in any way meaningful or of having say worth at all" (170). Wideman draws an interesting comparison between Robby's feelings specifically, a convicted criminal's entry into prison generally, and the Orthodox Jewish practice of saying Kaddish (187). Kaddish, he explains, may be said as a prayer of mourning or it may represent "a declaration of death" by which a "child becomes . . . a nonperson, cut off absolutely from all contact, a shadow the father will not acknowledge, a ghost referred to in the past tense as one who once was" (187-188). The imposition of a state of nonexistence on prisoners is not unlike what the historian Orlando Patterson referred to as "social death" and identified as the effect of chattel slavery on Africans brought to the United States (Andrews 130). As William Andrews writes, summarizing Patterson's use of the term: "[T]he system of chattel slavery was designed to prevent Africans and their descendants from building a new identity except in accordance with the dictates of their oppressors. Instead of an individual, slavery devised what Patterson calls 'a social nonperson,' a being that by legal definition could have no family, no personal honor, no community, no past, and no future. The intention of slavery was to create in the slave a sense of complete alienation from all human ties except those that bound him or her in absolute dependence to the master's will" (Andrews

the illusion of a prisoner's nonexistence is created and sustained by a system of representation that functions like a "two-sided, unbreakable mirror" (189). One side of this mirror reflects images of order and justice whereas the opposite side reflects prisoners as "deformed aberrations" (189). Keepers of such systems of representation guard them against interference that might distort the images that make "the free world and the prison world" appear distinct (189). Wideman theorizes the performances through which Black men make the two sides of the unbreakable mirror face each other, thus disrupting and undermining the containment wrought by dichotomous representations of Black men as deformed aberrations and criminals, on the one hand, and an uncompromised system of order and justice, on the other hand. Such performances distort the fictitious clarity of the racist system represented by the two-sided mirror by introducing a constellation of images that he intersperses throughout the fictitious arrangements that structure Black men's containment.

I think it useful to read Wideman's metaphor of a two-sided mirror in relation to Althusser's complementary model of Ideology as a doubly specular mirror-structure (Althusser 100). Althusser argues that individuals are interpellated as subjects within a system that functions like a pair of duplicate mirrors (100). In this model, the Absolute Subject acts as a central mirror that reflects the images of interpellated subjects situated on its periphery. The subjects who are interpellated around the central mirror see themselves and the images of their subjected selves in it. They do not distinguish between the two because they do not recognize that their subjected images are in fact performances. Therefore, they are not driven to look

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130). Although the system that transforms the prisoner into a non-person and that which subjected enslaved Africans to social death are very different, it is worth noting the similarly violent social and

beyond the performance that *is* the center mirror to understand the dynamic that compels it. Instead, interpellated subjects accept that the images they see in the center mirror are their own. Their acceptance positions them as the second mirror in Althusser's model which reflects the subjected images of interpellated subjects back to the central mirror. Together, the duplicate mirrors structure a hierarchical and oppressive relationship between Absolute Subject and interpellated subjects by making it seem "that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right" (Althusser 101). This artfully contrived relationship compels interpellated subjects to reproduce the terms of their own containment perpetually.

As I describe it above, Wideman's model features a two-sided, unbreakable mirror that represents a racialized system of binary representation. The two sides of the unbreakable mirror reflect opposite images in opposite directions. In Althusser's model, the two mirrors face each other and reflect the same image back and forth between them perpetually. In both models the reflections structure a system of containment similar to that which operates through representation in the United States. And both models are structured so as to prevent the images that they reflect from confronting their inherent contradictions. Wideman appropriates the technology of each of these mirror models and incorporates it into his use of language and storytelling to, in Morrison's words, force racial constructs "to reveal their struts and

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psychological effects wrought by both.

bolts, their technology and their carapace," so as to open the doors and windows of the racial house, and point the way toward freer spaces (Morrison "Home" 11).[32]

VI

In this section I discuss specific examples of the ways that Wideman's writing allows him to function as both witness and mirror in relation to the traditions and experiences of African American people (Wideman "Language"). Through rhetorical practices that expose, and sometimes disrupt, the damaging effects of hegemonic representations of Black men, his narratives function as would multiple mirrors if they were introduced into either of the two-mirror models that I describe earlier. In a manner of speaking, that is, Wideman increases the number and alters the nature of the reflections, or representations, in such systems. He therefore transforms binary systems of representation into systems characterized by multiplicity and dissonance, rather than dichotomy and certainty. Such dissonance produces the tension between the models of containment and resistance that Wideman theorizes.

In *Brothers and Keepers*, Wideman draws on his visits with his brother Robby, who is serving a life sentence in Western Penitentiary, to examine issues of complicity and resistance as they pertain to the containment of Black men in the prison-writ-large. His theory of containment and resistance and his understanding of the empowerment possible through performance grow out of his analysis. One of the most compelling aspects of this nonfictional narrative is Wideman's use of Robby's

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[32] In her essay "Home," Morrison juxtaposes the notion of a 'Home' with that of a 'racial house.' Whereas she envisions a 'Home' as a world that is free of racial hierarchy, she conceives of a 'racial house' as a racialized world in which it may be possible to function relatively freely, as long as one understands that freedom within a racial house is always tempered by the possibility for danger (4). I return to Morrison's arguments in this regard in the conclusion to this chapter.

story to enable his own to emerge, and to theorize his complicity in his own and his brother's containment.[33] He draws on Robby's experiences in prison to identify and to expose the illusions and fictions that Wideman himself had allowed to structure his own containment on the outside. As he puts it, he uses Robby's story as "a hiding place, a place to work out anxiety, to face threats too intimidating to handle in any other fashion" (*Brothers* 77). By connecting Robby's story to his own, Wideman exposes the false dichotomy between actual prisons and the world beyond its walls.

Wideman was not always aware of the degree to which he was himself contained because he had fallen prey to the binary illusions about Black people and Black men that structure the United States' as a prison-writ-large. Indeed, he initially viewed his trips to visit his brother in prison as no more than visits to a place with which he believed himself to be quite unfamiliar. Overtime, as he comes to better understand his brother's incarceration, he recognizes his complicity in both his own and his brother's containment. His complicity stemmed from his long-term behavior and feelings about Homewood and his family's blackness and poverty. For example, he admits to having measured his success by the geographic, social, and economic distance that he put between himself and his family (*Brothers* 27). He likens his early decision to flee Homewood to Robby's post-murder flight to Wyoming where Wideman lived with his family and worked as a professor. Reflecting on how he felt about Robby's visit to his world at the time he writes:

> Robby was a fugitive. My little brother was wanted for murder. For three months Robby had been running and hiding from the police. Now he was in Laramie, on my doorstep. Robbery. Murder. Flight. I

[33] The absence of quotation marks around dialogue in *Brothers and Keepers* and the lack of clear differentiation between the voices are examples of the doubleness that characterizes *Brothers and Keepers*.

> had pushed them out of my mind. I hadn't allowed myself to dwell on my brother's predicament. I had been angry, hurt and afraid, but I'd had plenty of practice cutting myself off from those sorts of feelings. Denying disruptive emotions was a survival mechanism I'd been forced to learn early in life. . . . Robby was my brother, but that was once upon a time, in another country. My life was relatively comfortable, pleasant, safe. I'd come west to escape the demons Robby personified. I didn't need outlaw brothers reminding me how much had been lost, how much compromised, how terribly the world still raged beyond the charmed circle of my life on the Laramie plains. (*BK* 11)

Whereas Robby was running from the law when he went to Laramie, Wideman "was running away from Pittsburgh, from poverty, from blackness" (26-27). Like Robby, who did not succeed in placing himself beyond the reach of the criminal justice system, such flights did not liberate Wideman in the ways that he had hoped since, whenever he had "any hesitations or reconsiderations about the path [he'd] chosen," he relied on Homewood to remind himself how lucky he was (26). In other words, he used his Homewood relatives and their lives as the measuring sticks by which he gauged his own success. Although he thought that he was running, he later realizes that he was in fact "fashioning a cage" (32). Wideman realizes that fundamental to his own emancipation is his ability to "get over the shame of acknowledging" all that his community and family were and were not (17). As Wideman puts it of his relationship to his incarcerated brother, "I lived far away. Light-years away on a freezing planet, a planet empty except for the single solitary cell that I inhabited. Visiting was illusion, deceit" (*Brothers* 184).

Wideman's description of his relationship to Robby and to the prison functions ironically because it collapses the time and space that separates the brothers, while it emphasizes the solitary nature of their containment. The geographic

and social distance that separates Wideman from Robby situates them in a relationship characterized by what Foucault calls "lateral invisibility," or the relationship between prisoners in a Panopticon whom sidewalls prevent from coming into contact with each other (*Discipline* 200). In a Panopticon the walls that divide individual cells create the illusion among inmates of being in a state of solitude. In fact, their containment is wrought by a system in which order is completely dependent on "multiplicity that can be numbered and supervised," and which is thus greatly threatened by the risk of disorder through the formation of collectives, should the walls that separate individual cells and produce "lateral visibility" give way (*Discipline* 200-201). By melding Robby's story with his own, Wideman embarks on a mission to bring down those walls by disrupting the representations that structure binary relationships between inside and outside, guilt and innocence, good and evil, and, perhaps most importantly, brothers and keepers.

In *Brothers and Keepers*, Wideman is as much concerned with what the book eventually has to say, as with the process that he, as a writer and as an African American male, must master before he is able to say it. Whereas Wideman claims to have *lived* his story in ways that at times diminished those on its periphery, he *writes* his story so as to resolve the issues, and dissolve the barriers, separating him from the people in Homewood and his family, all of whom reside in cells that are in the end not so very distinct or distant from each other. His challenge, in other words, is to produce a narrative that functions itself as a mirror that reflects different ways for Black men to see themselves, to conceptualize the nature and function of their own containment, and to respond in the most emancipatory ways possible.

The emergence of such a narrative is complicated, however, by the limitations of the worldview to which Wideman once subscribed, and which made him complicit in his own containment. As a young professional, he believed that there were "[j]ust two choices as far as I could tell: either/or rich or poor. White or black. Win or lose. . . . My mind was split by oppositions, by mutually exclusive categories" (27). Driven by a worldview so divided, he believed that to "succeed in the man's world you must become like the man and the man sure didn't claim no bunch of nigger relatives in Pittsburgh" (27-28). For Wideman, that meant functioning as though he were two people rather than risk exposing "in either world the awkward mix of school and home I'd become" (27). He illustrates the devastating effects of his double life in the "sawing dream" that he relates to Robby. In the dream, he explains, "I am a man, myself, but not myself" (193). The dream is set in a "honeycomb of steel" where the dream man cannot see the stars, where he is surrounded by the smell of death, and where he is doomed to reside forever among fifteen hundred other men (193). He can hear, although he cannot see, the other inmates. As the dream man tries to retreat into the "deathly sleep that's the closest thing to mercy prison ever grants," he becomes aware of a "monotonous sawing sound" which turns out to the sound of the other men snoring (193). The sound "reminds him of the funny papers, the little cloud containing saw and log drawn above a character's head so you can *see the sound of sleeping*" (193 my emphasis). As he closes his eyes and listens more closely to the sound, he envisions himself as the cartoon figure who is sawing off parts of his own body (194). The dream-man imagines the cartoon figure methodically "lopping off

his own flesh and blood" in a manner that seems "almost bored, almost asleep, ready to snore like the saw's snoring as it chews through his body" (194).

Wideman's description of this dream theorizes containment and resistance in ways that are extremely provocative. The image of a "honey-comb of steel" in which fifteen hundred men are caged invokes the compartmentalized structure of a Panoptic prison. Although the dream man who is contained therein cannot see beyond his cell, he can hear the "fitful stirrings, clattering bars, groaning, the sudden outcries of fear, rage, madness, and God knows what else" that signify the presence of other prisoners whose behavior disrupts the order of the system (193). The noise that they make undermines the effects of "lateral invisibility" by signifying the possibility that they might become "subject[s] in communication," even though they remain subject to the "axial visibility" that renders them "object[s] of information" (Foucault *Discipline* 200). Wideman juxtaposes the disorderly sounds of one group of prisoners with the monotonous snoring of the prisoners who are sleeping. He then links the dream-man's focus on the snoring emitted by docile, sleeping bodies to the similarly sleepy manner in which the cartoon figure, whom the dream man imagines, violently dismembers himself. In Wideman's dream, the cartoon figure who dismembers himself is twice removed from Wideman himself. Wideman *re*members that cartoon man through the imagination of the dream man and through his retelling of the dream to Robby. In the process, he also *re*members himself as a man who has learned that a mind "split by oppositions, by mutually exclusive categories," can only reproduce its own containment and self-destruction, and can never so much as dream of freedom and wholeness (27).

Wideman theorizes the processes of compartmentalization and decompartmentalizaton as methods by which to evade the oppressive effects of containment wrought by binary worldviews and systems of representation. Compartmentalization is a process that involves chopping "your world into manageable segments" and "segregating yourself within safety zones white people have not littered with barricades and landmines" (*Brothers* 221).[34] It "begins as a pragmatic reaction to race prejudice" but in time becomes an "instinctive response" that makes a "special way of seeing . . . second nature" (221). That "special way of seeing" requires that one "ignore the visible landscape" because "it will never change," and instead "learn a kind of systematic skepticism, a stoicism, and, if you're lucky, ironic detachment" (221). However, Wideman explains, compartmentalization is also an ironic process that

> begins with your black skin, and your acknowledgment of racial identity, and becomes both a way of seeing and being seen. Blackness is a retreat to the security of primal night. Blackness connects me with my brother but also separates us absolutely, each one alert, trembling behind the vulnerable walls of our dark skins. (221-222)

In order for compartmentalization to structure "Blackness" as a "retreat" instead of a barrier that separates it must occur in conjunction with the process of decompartmentalization. Decompartmentalization involves seeing, naming, and finding ways out of spaces that are not safety zones, but rather sites of containment. It involves reconstructing, and sometimes demolishing, such sites so as to counteract the oppressive effects of particular technologies of containment. It requires that one

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[34] Wideman's interest in the processes of compartmentalization and decompartmentaliztion is evident throughout his work, but particularly in *Reuben* (1987). I explore *Reuben* in some detail in Chapter Four.

"always take second readings, decode appearances, pick out obstructions erected to keep you in your place. Then work around them" (*Brothers* 221). As with compartmentalization, decompartmentalizing involves using what Wideman calls a "special way of seeing" to structure places in which to foster the signs and sounds of resistance and solidarity, rather than docility and complicity.

For Wideman, *Brothers and Keepers* represents just such a space. Indeed writing *Brothers and Keepers* was an integral part of Wideman's effort to teach himself to decompartmentalize. As he explains:

> This book is part of the unlearning of my first response to my brother's imprisonment. In spite of good intentions, I constantly backslide. In large matters . . . or small, neglecting to relay somebody's greeting to my brother or a hello from Robby to some friend on the outside, I'll revert to my old ways. My oversights embarrass me, shake me up, because I'm reminded that in crucial ways my brother still doesn't exist for me in the intervals between visits. The walls become higher, thicker, unbreachable when I allow myself to become part of the conspiracy. (222)

During the early stages of writing the book, Wideman describes his imagination as a "curving mirror doubling the darkness" (87). Lying latent in his imagination are the words through which Wideman eventually structures a zone of "sweet, solitary pleasure," a place that is "velvet-soft and black," a story of brothers and keepers in which he and Robby become enfolded and enclosed (87). Initially, however, his imagination fails to function as a "curving mirror" but rather reproduces a "trick of the [two-sided] glass" that renders the 'brother' subordinate to the 'keeper,' and then proclaims to the latter, "[y]ou're the fairest of them all" (87). The failure of Wideman's first draft is attributable to this "trick of the glass" which compels him "to impose a dramatic shape" on Robby's story even though, on account of Robby's life

sentence, it was unlikely that there would be any "dramatic, external changes in Robby's circumstances" (194). The failure of the first draft was inevitable so long as Wideman envisioned it as a "powerful engine being constructed to set [Robby] free" and to enable his return from the state of nonexistence imposed on prisoners (195). In contrast, the final draft of the narrative succeeds in becoming a safety zone wrought through processes of compartmentalization and decompartmentalization, and by the "curving mirror" of Wideman's imagination, only when he relates what it is about Robby that enables "his slow, internal adjustment day by day to an unbearable situation" (194-195).[35]

Wideman attunes himself to Robby's voice that "issues through a crack" in the "curving mirror" of Wideman's imagination, insisting on its right to be heard. Although writing *Brothers and Keepers* does not free Robby from prison, the process does free Wideman from his role in the "conspiracy" of Black men's containment and as his brother's keeper in particular. The collaborative writing process teaches Wideman to abandon his inclination to remain "two or three steps ahead of [Robby], making fiction out of his words" (88). He learns to resist the urge to overwrite what Robby says with words of his own, and to clean up Robby's image by manufacturing "compelling before-and-after images" and making "the bad too bad and good too good" (195). To manufacture such dichotomous images is to fall victim to the tricks of the unbreakable, two-sided mirror. Instead, Wideman is careful not to represent

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[35] Wideman uses the word "unbearable" in ways that he credits to his mother. As he explains, "'[u]nbearable' is my mother's word. She uses it often but never lightly. . . . Unbearable is not that which can't be borne, but what must be endured forever" (*Brothers* 181).

Robby as "a man whose qualities were self-evident cause for returning him to the world of free people" (195). As Wideman puts it:

> The character traits that landed Robby in prison are the same ones that allowed him to survive with dignity, and pain and a sense of himself as infinitely better than the soulless drone prison demands he become. Robby knows his core is intact; his optimism, his intelligence, his capacity for love, his pride, his dream of making it big, becoming somebody special. And though these same qualities helped get him in trouble and could derail him again, I'm happy they are still there. I rejoice with him. (195)[36]

Wideman's visits with Robby in the prison teach Wideman to see the world in ways that do not rely on dichotomies. Wideman acquires a way of seeing that makes it possible for him to represent his brother as a man whom prison had changed but not broken, and whose behavior was informed by "a certain consistency . . . a basic impetuous honesty that made him see himself and his world with unflinching clarity. He never stopped asking questions. He never allowed answers to stop him" (195). And, as Wideman puts it, "therein lay the story," for he succeeds both in seeing, then representing, Robby in ways incongruous with the fictions and dichotomies that structure hegemonic representations of Black men (195).[37]

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[36] Wideman makes the same point in a slightly different way when he writes: "The worst things [Robby] did followed from the same impulse as the best. He could be unbelievably dumb, corrupt, selfish, and destructive but those qualities could keep him down no more than his hope, optimism, his refusal to accept a dull, inferior portion could buoy him above the hell that engulfed black boys in the Homewood streets." (195).

[37] Wideman explores the effects of his failure to decompartmentalize his life via a description of a trip to Maine with his white wife Judy and Robby. On the drive Robby has "a good ole nigger ball" listening to "black music on the radio" (28). Wideman recalls how he felt shame and anxiety because, although it was music that they'd both grown up "hearing and loving and learning to sing in Mom's living room . . . you were doing it in my new 1966 Dodge Dart, on the way to Martha's Vineyard and Maine with my new white wife in the backseat. Didn't you know we'd left Pittsburgh, didn't you understand that classical music volume moderate was preferred in these circumstances? Papa's got a brand-new bag. And you were gon act a nigger and let the cat out" (*BK 28).* Wideman's discomfort in this situation stems from his inability to reconcile the gap between the place that he calls home and the very different space to which he thought he had escaped. His insistence that it is easier to live as though he were two people renders him unable to reconcile the chaos that Robby's presence in the car

Through the shared process of writing *Brothers and Keepers*, Wideman realizes that his visits to the prison are less journeys to an unfamiliar place than descents into the deepest, most closely surveilled compartments that contain African American men. An important aspect of Wideman's theory of containment and resistance arises from his recognition and exploration of the "artificiality of *visiting*" actual prisons (184, original emphasis). Since a person cannot visit a place where he already resides, a visit to a prison for Black men, whom are merely passing from one sector of the prison-writ-large to another is an oxymoron.[38] Yet, the rituals to which visitors must submit in order to enter the prison delineate a line between inside and outside, freedom and containment. Theoretically, visitation rituals facilitate the temporary passage of visitors from their lives as free people to places in which they become subordinate. This fictitious divide tricks the unsuspecting Black, male visitor into believing that he is entering a world that differs significantly from the one that he

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brings to his neatly compartmentalized life. Wideman recalls his experience at college when a white male student challenged him about what constituted "real blues" (29). Wideman responded to the challenge angrily. Wideman wonders why that "smart ass white son of a bitch [had] so much power over [him]?" He answers these questions by recognizing that, "Four hundred years of oppression, of lies, had empowered [whites] to use the music of [Black] people against him" (32). Wideman senses the ways in which "[white] power, the raw, crude force mock[s] [him], [and] diminish[es] [him]" (32). In other words, this white boy denies Wideman's identity by undermining one important way in which the latter sees himself, that is, Wideman's belief that he "*was* the blues" (28).

[38] In a passage describing an occasion on which Wideman took his wife, mother, and children to visit Robby, Wideman notes his ironic feelings as he accompanies his family through the parking lot to the prison: "I fall in behind them. Far enough away to be alone. To be separate from the women and separate from the children. I need to say to whoever's watching—guards, prisoners invisible behind the barred three-story windows partitioning the walls, These are my people. They're with me. I'm responsible. I need to say that, to hang back and preside, to stroll, almost saunter, aware of the weight, the necessity of vigilance because here I am, on alien turf, a black man, and I'm in charge. For a moment at least these women, these children have me to turn to. And I'm one hundred percent behind them, prepared to make anyone who threatens them answer to me. And that posture, that prerogative remains rare for a black man in American society. Rare *today*, over 120 years after slavery and second-class citizenship have been abolished by law. The guards know that. The prisoners know that. It's for their benefit as well as my own and my family's that I must carry myself in a certain way, make certain rules clear even though we are entering a hostile world, even though the bars exist to cut off the

inhabits on the outside. To enter the prison as a visitor requires one's acquiescence to rituals that make it seem that one is giving up "one version of reality for another" (Wideman 183). One of the most significant rituals involves passing through a series of physical barriers that includes a metal-detecting machine. In the case of the latter, Wideman notes that although the "reason for such a security measure is clear; the extreme sensitivity of the machine is less-easily explained" (185). Given that women are required to remove wedding rings, underwire bras, and structured undergarments, he surmises that the point of the machine is to humiliate visitors (185). On one occasion, for instance, as he passes through the metal detector Wideman ponders what will happen when he brings his sons who just had metal braces put on their teeth to visit Robby: "Whose responsibility will it be to inspect the kids' mouths for weapons? Will the boys feel like horses on sale? Have I taught Dan and Jake enough about their history so that they'll recall auction blocks and professional appraisers of human flesh" (186)? As a Black man, Wideman feels particularly susceptible to the effects of such rituals, which require that one endure being treated like a criminal to secure passage from one section of the prison-writ-large to another. Although Wideman is permitted to pass through the barriers to the prison, the process reminds him of occasions outside the prison when his passage through similar technologies was impeded by his membership in a criminalized class. For instance, he relates an incident "during the early seventies when paranoia about skyjacking was rampant and a lone black male, youngish, large, athletically built, casually dressed, 'fit' the profile of an air pirate" (186). On that occasion, Wideman was pulled aside and subjected to

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possibility of the prisoners seeing themselves as I must see myself, striding free, in charge of women and children, across the official lot" (44).

a special search (186). A similar incident occurred while he was traveling with his family at Christmas time. That time his "sons were forced to unload their new cowboy pistols from [their] carry-on bag and stow them in the baggage hold" (186). Meanwhile, an off-duty, white, male cop was permitted to board the aircraft with a .38 in his briefcase (186). The processes by which visiting rituals designate what appears to be a rigid division between the worlds inside and outside prison walls disguise the extent to which such a division is considerably less distinct and at times, particularly for African American males, non-existent.

Over time, Wideman realizes that passage into a prison leads to a sector of containment that is governed by far more than a "dramatic flip-flop of values" (183). Such a simple reversal, he explains, "would be too easy. If black became white and good became bad and fast became slow, the players could learn the trick of reversing labels, and soon the upside-down world would seem natural" (183). Accordingly, "prison rules are designed to keep you ignorant, keep you guessing, insure your vulnerability" (183). Such rules make it possible for keepers to both define and control 'deviance' and 'deviants' such as Robby. Not only are keepers "empowered to say *You go to the right. You go to the left*," they are also empowered to define what is right and what is left (48). As Robby so aptly puts it, the rules make it seem as though African American males are "just spozed to fuck up and keep on fucking up and that's why we in the mess we in the first place" (*BK* 149).[39] Any prisoner who "insists on seeing other versions of himself, is in constant danger" (183). Further,

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[39] Rubin "Hurricane" Carter makes a point similar to Robby's when he writes: "The penitentiary was geared to making the black inmates rise to the heights of their own incompetencies—even in the protection of themselves" (164).

"you were supremely eligible for a bullet if the guards couldn't press your button. If they hadn't learned how to manipulate you, if you couldn't be bought or sold . . . then you were a threat" (*BK* 82-83). Like Althusser's "bad subject," the prisoner who literally *sees* his way outside of mirror-like systems of containment of the sort that both Wideman and Althusser theorize, is at risk of being violently (and permanently) 'resubjected' through the barrel of a gun (101, 75).

On the one hand, it would seem that there exists no real possibility for inmate resistance as it puts him "in no less jeopardy than going along with the program. Because the program [itself is] contrived to kill you" (83). Robby understood that "he was sentenced to die. That all sentences were death sentences" (83). He could choose to see other versions of himself, in which case "the guards would do everything in their power to kill him." Or, he could accept the ways in which he is seen, thus succumbing to the pressure "to surrender dignity, self-respect, control over his own mind and body," in which case he would "become a beast, and what was good in him would die" (83). On the other hand, as Robby sees it, resistance begins with his acceptance that prison "was the white man's world and wasn't no way around it or over it or under it," and with his knowledge that his survival depends on his willingness to "get down and dance to the tune the man be playing" (114). In Robby's case, to "dance to the tune that the man be playing" involves engaging in performances that worry the line between complicity and resistance and enable Robby to "maintain sanity" while minimizing opportunities for the keepers to destroy him" (*BK* 83).

Wideman relates a compelling example of a performance that involves dancing to the "tune the man be playing" in his short story "All Stories are True" (1992). In this story, Robby's fictional counterpart Tommy explains the nature and function of a performance through which he and other Black inmates play on guards' fears of Black men as a way of exerting some control over the conditions of their own containment:

> I think I'm finally beginning to understand why they so evil to us. They're scared of the Blackman. Really scared. More scared than I ever knew. More scared than they know themselves. When I first come in the joint I knew something about the fear. Knew we had something on them. Wild as we was we didn't give them no chance to run game on us. We had learned the hard way coming up running the streets what they thought of us. Crazy Killers. Animals. Dope fiends. Niggers you got to lock up or kill before they kill you. That was the deal. So we played the hand dealed us. We was stone outlaws. Fuck wit us you better be prepared to take us down cause if you don't we coming down on you. . . . We saw fear in their eyes. We fucked with them to keep it there. . . . Wasn't really me in the first place. I was just playing the outlaw role I thought I needed to play to survive the joint. I changed but they stayed scared of me. (13-14)

In one sense, the Black inmates, through their performances as "outlaws," become complicit in the reproduction of images of Black men as a criminal class. However, their performances are underwritten by their knowledge that people can exploit such images to gain leverage within the system that contains them. That is, they can manipulate such images in ways that are resistant because they offset the effects of absolute control. How does this work exactly? First, such images perpetuate the guards' fears of Black men. Inmates then reinforce that fear by behaving in ways that cause the guards to modulate the ways that they deal with the Black inmates so as to avoid provoking their "wild" and "crazy" impulses and becoming a victim of them.

From the inmates' points of view, the material and psychic benefits of their performances outweigh the costs that their apparent complicity exacts.

To put it in other terms, in contrast to Althusser's interpellated subjects, the inmates are able to look beyond the guards' performances of power (the central mirror) to identify the ideological machine that drives them (racism). The inmates' refusal to acknowledge images of Black men as "Crazy Killers. Animals. Dope fiends" as accurate reflections of themselves (the second mirror), empowers them to deflect the counterfeit images with which they are confronted, if not the full effects of the containment that they produce. The inmates "run game" on the keepers by using the latter's methods of control and containment against them, and thereby transform perpetual systems of containment into systems in which these and other kinds of performances can destabilize hegemonic operations.[40]

Whatever else Wideman's visits to Robby become, they begin "as compromise, an acceptance of defeat" (191).[41] As Wideman explains, visitors and

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[40] It is also possible to view the inmates' performances through the lens of blackface minstrelsy. Eric Lott, in *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the America Working Class* (1995), argues that blackface performances by whites were "a means of exercising white control over explosive cultural forms as much as [they were] an avenue of derision" (115). Lott uses the notion of the counterfeit to refer to such performances. He also introduces the notion of the "seeming counterfeit" as a figure for blackface performances by Blacks. If we posit a loose relationship between the guards who are designated keepers of Black male bodies, and white blackface performers, and Black blackface performers such as Master Juba and the Black inmates who perform in "All Stories are True," it is possible to see both the counterfeit and the seeming counterfeit at work. In Wideman's story, the inmates recuperate some control over their own images through performances as 'outlaws." In the context of the prison, such performances by Black inmates cause the counterfeit to breakdown, or the constructed image to become frighteningly real. The breakdown of the counterfeit forces the guards to negotiate the tension caused by these "acts of unsettling authenticity" (Lott 113). The resultant tension is the sign that a dynamic of containment and resistance is at work in which the control of Black men is at stake.

[41] Wideman's sense that "each visit's rooted in denial, compromise, a sinking feeling of failure" stems from his concern that suppressing the "rage, the urge to fight back doesn't ride from a truer, better self" (191). Rather, he worries that what the suppression denies is "not the instinctual core of my being but an easily sidestepped, superficial layer of bravado, a ferocity I'd like to think is real but that winds up being no more than a Jonathon Jackson, George Jackson, Soledad-brother fantasy, a carryover from the

prisoners have just two choices about how to respond to the humiliating rituals of passage: they can either resist overtly on the grounds that "dying with your hands on an enemy's throat is better than living under his boot," or they can agree to go along with the rules one more time, knowing that "the other way, the alternative is always there" (190, 191). Out of concern for his brother's safety Wideman endures the visiting rituals because he knows that the guard remains in power after the visit is over and Wideman leaves (192). As he puts it, when the visit ends the guard is "free to take out on [Robby] whatever revenge he couldn't exact from me and my smart mouth" (192). Accordingly, in instances where it seems that he and Robby are subjected to unreasonable restrictions and the inconsistent enforcement of constantly changing rules during their visits, Wideman's strategy is to "take low, shake my head but stroll away (just enough nigger in my walk to tell the guard I know what he thinks of me but that I think infinitely less of him)" (192).

Still, like those of the inmates in "All Stories are True," Wideman's visits to the prison teach him that there is a kind of freedom that can be had through finding ways to name "the tune the man be playing" while one is dancing to it (114). In Wideman's case, he uses language and storytelling, the modes of performance most readily available to him, like the inmates use their performances as outlaws. An example of such a performance is Wideman's description of a guard with whom Robby has had trouble on more than one occasion:

> The guard's chest protrudes like there's compressed air instead of flesh inside the gray blouse of his uniform. A square head. Pale skin except

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Old Wild West, shoot-em up days as a kid. . . . Maybe I needed to imagine myself in that role because I knew how far from the truth it was. Kidding myself so I could take the visits seriously, satisfy myself that I was doing all I could, doing better than nothing" (191).

> on his cheeks, which are bluish and raw from razor burn. His mustache and short curly hair are meticulously groomed, too perfect to be real. The stylized hair of comic-book superheroes. A patch of blue darkness etched with symmetrical accent lines. His eyes avoid mine. He had spoken in a clipped, mechanical tone of voice. Not one man talking to another but a peremptory recital of rules droned at some abstraction in the middle distance where the guard's eyes focus while his lips move. (192)

By way of this description, Wideman passes the guard and all that the role of the keeper represents through a fun-house mirror. The description interrupts the constancy and consistency of hegemonic technologies that contain African American men. It does so in a number of ways. First, the description de-humanizes the guard by depicting him not as a figure of absolute power or even a man, but as an air-filled doll with features that resemble those of a comic-book superhero. Second, it exposes the markers of the guard's authority—his uniform, his clean-shaven appearance, and his articulation of rules—as a costume that disguises the contrived nature of the authority that the guard performs. Third, it undercuts the authority of the guard's gaze, which seems only vaguely to register the evasively abstract prisoner whose subjection he oversees. Finally, it denies the import of the guard's speech by reducing it to the unspecific sound of a drone. As Wideman puts it: "Nazi Gestapo Frankenstein robot motherfucker . . . He's what he is and there's no way to get around that or for the moment get around him because he's entrenched in this no-man's land and he is what he is and that's worse than any names I can call him" (192).

Wideman's visits with Robby ultimately leave him unprepared either "to step through the looking glass" that separates him from his brother or to acknowledge the terms of its reflections (182). He theorizes his conundrum through a story about a time when he went to visit Robby by way of a new route. Although the new route gets

him to the prison in record time, Wideman arrives only to find that he is not ready to pass through the gates into the prison. He is unprepared because the trip to the prison is as much a psychic journey as it is "a matter of miles and minutes" (182). Both journeys require that he traverse a "vast, unchartered space, a no-man's land," that marks a divide between prison and Homewood, prisoner and man, brother and keeper. To visit the "alien world inside 'The Walls'" of the prison, a visitor must cross from one side of the two-sided mirror to the other, knowing that on the other side "the rules change. Visitors must take leave of the certainties underpinning their everyday lives" (182). The visitor does so, knowing that "the setting has been contrived not so much to allay your grief, your sense of loss but to profit from them, mock them, and mock the one you need to see" (185).

Wideman's desire to confirm that Robby is still alive, still inside, and his inability to alter the visitation processes in literal terms, compel him to reimagine the rituals in the form of a personal narrative of ascent. He writes:

> I focused on the ritual, the succession of things to be done in order to enter the prison. In my mind I *passed* through the iron gates of the official parking lot, I glanced at the stone walls, the river as I *crossed* the crowded lot to the visitors' annex. I *climbed* the steep concrete stairs. I *faced* the guard in his cage outside the waiting room, presented my identification, stated my brother's name and number, my relationship to him, *wrote* all that down on a sheet of mimeo paper, then found a seat in the dingy room, avoiding the blank faces of other visitors, frustration and anger building as I wait, wait, wait for the magic call that allows me down the steps, across a courtyard, up more steps, through steel doors and iron-barred doors into the lounge where my brother waits. (184 my emphasis)

The processes that enable Wideman's physical ascent to a space where he is reunited with his brother—passing, crossing, climbing, facing, writing—signify structural or systemic transgressions of one type or another. Such transgressions also characterize

the processes that Wideman undergoes in his psychic journey that leads to his reunion with Robby and his reconnection to his Homewood roots. Unlike his shortcut to the prison, this journey prepares him to take up arms with his brother(s), to refuse to remain a "conspirator" in the process of making the prison walls for African Americans "higher, thicker, unbreachable," and to move beyond compartmentalization to commence his journey towards 'Home' (224).

VII

So deeply entrenched are the ideological foundations and institutional frameworks of the United States' prison-writ-large that I often wonder whether it is futile to think that African American males might one day function freely outside its parameters. In her essay titled simply "Home," Toni Morrison celebrates the potential to sidestep such futility through racial projects that envision "a-world-in-which-race-does-*not*-matter" and represent it as "something other than a . . . failed and always-failing dream" (3, original emphasis). As a writer, Morrison considers her challenge to be that of moving "the job of unmattering race away from pathetic yearning and futile desire . . . to a manageable, doable, modern human activity" (3-4). She employs the notion of 'Home' as a model for racial projects that are underscored by visions similar to hers. She uses 'Home' as a metaphor for such projects for two reasons. First, a home is a place where people can live safely and comfortably. Thus, 'Home' represents both a race-specific and a nonracist space (5). 'Home' is a place where safety exists without walls and where difference is prized but not privileged (12). It is a space characterized by "the concrete thrill of borderlessness—a kind of out of doors safety" (10). Second, 'Home' signifies the transformation that has to happen if

writers, scholars, artists, prisoners, and all of the people whom we cannot locate within such handy categories, are to "domesticate" the various racial projects in which they are wittingly or unwittingly engaged. As this chapter suggests, the United States' prison-writ-large makes it impossible to see the nation as a 'Home.' It is possible, however, to view the United States as a racial 'House.' A racial house, Morrison explains, is a space that we all inhabit. It is governed by "the master's voice and its assumptions of the all-knowing law of the white father" (4). Morrison is careful to emphasize that 'Home' cannot be constructed by simply redesigning a racial 'House' and decorating it with names like 'multiculturalism' and 'diversity' (8). However, it is possible to make a racial 'House' habitable by transforming it from a windowless prison "from which no cry could be heard" into "an open house, grounded, yet generous in its supply of windows and doors" (4).[42] Racial projects that undertake to do the latter involve finding ways to "carve away accretions of deceit, blindness, ignorance, paralysis, and sheer malevolence embedded in raced language so that other kinds of perception" are not only available, but inevitable (Morrison "Home" 7).

Morrison's designation of the United States as a racial 'House' and her cautiously optimistic description of it as a prison with windows and doors support my argument that the United States functions as a prison-writ-large for African American males, and my comparison of that prison's technologies to those employed in Panoptic prisons. In this chapter, I have argued that the prison-writ-large compartmentalizes African American men in ways that encourage them to become

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[42] Morrison cautions against the risk of converting a racial 'House' "into a palace" where racism does not hurt or where "coexistence offers[s] the delusion of agency" (4).

complicit not only in their own containment, but also in that of their brothers. I have suggested that power must be distinguished from the performances that produce the subjection of African American males. Rather, I have argued that power is more usefully understood as the tension between containment and resistance that grows out of performances taking place at all levels within the prison-writ-large. The performances in which Black men engage while incarcerated, on the job, at play, and through story and song, help to prevent the prison-writ-large from becoming a windowless prison in which only their silence and subjection prevails. Although a 'Home' of the sort that Morrison envisions has yet to be realized through the racial projects in which people of all races are engaged, Black men's performances represent some of the most compelling attempts to forge windows from which different visions of the world may be seen and through which "roars of battle" may be heard. It is to specific examples of such performances that I turn now.

Chapter Two

"Holler if Ya Hear Me": Black Men, (Bad) Raps and Effective Histories

The drums sounded the warning
Oppressors are coming
Oppressors are coming
And when slavers discovered
How much we communicated
With music they could not understand
They took up our drums
But not our rhythm

-T.J. Reddy "A Poem for Black Rhythmeticians"

I

This chapter borrows its title from Tupac Shakur's song "Holler if Ya Hear Me" (*Strictly 4 My Niggaz* 1993). Both the song and this chapter address what Houston Baker characterizes as African American men's struggles to be heard, as opposed to being rendered silent participants in the 'scene' of American violence. I begin by locating rap within a frontier-like space in the United States. Next, I liken particular rap-related projects to what Foucault calls effective histories, and locate them within an African American aesthetic tradition. I then read Rodney King's silence about his 1991 beating by Los Angeles police officers, his subsequent investments in the rap music industry, and Ice Cube's song "Who got the Camera," in relation both to Baker's argument and the notion of the rap artist as effective historian. The last part of the chapter focuses specifically on Tupac Shakur. By way of close readings of some of his songs and his THUG LIFE and EXODUS 1811 tattoos, I argue that Tupac's work was that of an effective historian and that his particular brand of activism was informed by specific African American religious and cultural traditions. Finally, I locate the debates about rap music within a theory of

performance that enables us to understand the complex dynamic of power, complicity, and opposition to which critics' responses to rap music and artists themselves call attention.

Tricia Rose, in *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994), argues that "[r]ap music, more than any other form of black cultural expression, articulates the chasm between black urban lived experience and dominant, 'legitimate' . . . ideologies regarding equal opportunity and racial inequality" (102). I envision the chasm to which Rose refers as a frontier-like space because, although it marks the political, ideological, social, and economic divides between Blacks and whites, it also represents the site of some of the most creative, troubling, complex, and controversial discussions and representations of Black men and the Black male experience that we have seen to date. I prefer to use the notion of a "frontier," as opposed to a "chasm," to conceptualize the divide to which Rose calls our attention. Whereas a chasm marks an "irreconcilable division, separation, or difference," a frontier connotes a "new or relatively unexploited field that offers scope for large exploitative or developmental activity" (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*). The notion of a frontier seems a more apt way to characterize the tension-fraught cultural spaces within which whites and Blacks manage and contest their relationships to one another and their places in the various hierarchies in the United States. James C. Scott, in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990), claims that the activities that take shape within these spaces structure "a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate" (14).[43] Out

[43] Scott includes in his list of examples of the latter "activities such as poaching, pilfering, clandestine tax evasion, and intentionally shabby work" (14).

of these sites arise hidden transcripts, which have two components: first, they are specific to particular social sites; and second, they may include speech acts, in addition to gestures and practices "that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript" (Scott 14, 4). In this chapter, I address how rap music produces and responds to the tensions that define such spaces in ways that further African American men's efforts to speak about, to speak to, and to speak against the various systems of containment to which they are subject. My primary concern is to counter the silencing effect of responses to rap music and rap artists that overlook, dismiss, misunderstand, or misrepresent the resistant characteristics of rap. By way of this emphasis, I aim to open a space in which African American perspectives and comments about what it means to be Black and male in the United States may be heard rather than 'scene.'[44]

Michel Foucault, in his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," offers a way of conceptualizing the work that rap artists undertake. Foucault establishes an opposition between genealogy and what he terms "effective history." Genealogy, Foucault explains, "is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary" (139). Its role is to record histories "of morals, ideals, and metaphysical concepts" and "the concept of liberty or of the ascetic life" in ways that its records come to be viewed as acceptable representations of events (152). Such records, however, on account of their static, tangible nature, can never adequately represent dynamic, mutable, and intangible conceptualizations and experiences. Rather, they attempt to compensate by forcing multiplicities into the inadequately tailored form of "events on the stage of historical

[44] Later in this chapter I draw on Houston Baker's essay "Scene . . . Not Heard" in relation to the silencing of Black men about their experiences in the United States.

process" (152).[45] In contrast, an effective history refuses to align itself to "the demands of objective science." It does so by refusing "the certainty of absolutes" and by recording events in ways that are "capable of liberating divergence and marginal elements" (153). As Foucault puts it, "[h]istory becomes 'effective' to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being—as it divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself" (154). An effective history molds genealogical events into the more fluid forms of reversals of "a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it, a feeble domination that poisons itself as it grows lax, the entry of a masked 'other'" (154). John Fiske, in "Black Bodies of Knowledge: Notes on an Effective History," argues that effective historians (re)produce historical narratives centered on bodies that have been imprinted and/or destroyed by, among other things, traditional history's "grand view" (187).[46] History's "grand view" prioritizes distance rather than proximity to individual narratives and the people who embody them (Fiske 187). In contrast, effective histories (re)produce dominant narratives and reshape events so as to invert power relations, if only temporarily, by exposing, evading, and/or subverting the incongruous narratives on which social hierarchies are founded and maintained (188). Effective historians merge the

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[45] Such events, in a genealogical sense, include decisions, treaties, reigns, or battles (Foucault 154).

[46] As an example of an effective historian, Fiske discusses M'banna Kantako, a blind, Black, male operator of the unlicensed radio station, *Black Liberation Radio*, that he runs out of his home. Kantako's agenda is to increase African Americans' understanding of the various abuses to which they have been subjected by whites. Kantako has focused, for instance, on the ways that whites have gone about using and abusing Black bodies to yield profits (Fiske 186). Kantako has used his radio station to call attention to the details of the Tuskegee experiments that began in 1932, and to the story of a Black man, Sam McKeever, who, between 1880 and 1910, was paid by local hospitals to kill other Blacks whose bodies were then used for research purposes (Fiske 186). Fiske employs the terms "information

experiences of physical and social bodies into an historical narrative that is altered by more recent experiences and perspectives (189). Effective historians therefore thrive in frontier spaces because they force public and hidden transcripts into an ongoing contest.

A number of rap artists, including Ice Cube and Tupac Shakur, represent excellent examples of effective historians. Such artists employ rap music and the culture(s) within which it circulates to call attention to, to critique, and to reconfigure the relationships between the points of view of panoptic eye(s) and those of Black men. They articulate such perspectives through body and song as a way of engaging in a battle in which nothing less than the physical and psychic freedom of African American men is at stake. It is to artists who undertake work of this nature that I turn my attention in this chapter to discuss how they put their musical and corporeal narratives into contest with the transcripts and territories from which Black men's voices are so frequently excluded.

II

There exists an obvious emphasis in rap music on the issues and concerns of disenfranchised African American people living in urban environments characterized by excessive violence, unemployment and underemployment, high crime rates, police brutality, and poverty. Critics often choose to view the culture and interpret rap lyrics as though they were evidence of an inherently pathological African American culture and frequently miss the artists' critiques of racist beliefs, political policies, and ideological shifts that created and support the preservation of such forms of

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guerrillas" or "knowledge gangsters" to refer to those who construct and disseminate effective histories.

containment. Yet, rap's frequent emphases on the minute and often contradictory details of hegemonic discourses, its aggressive inversion of those discourses, and its use of African American autobiographical and historical narratives situate the genre uniquely to interfere with traditional history's 'grand view' that is necessary to uphold the supporting logic of American racism and its effects. Although it is important not to lose sight of the ways that the rap industry makes it profitable for young Black men to become complicit in their own oppression, it is equally important to promote hearings for rap artists whose artistic work merits critical analysis and/or resists co-optation by the keepers of public transcripts who would use them to further the project of constructing Black males as delinquents, rather than politically astute 'raptivists.'[47]

Bakari Kitwana, in *The Rap on Gangsta Rap* (1994), cautions against being too quick to associate rap with an African American aesthetic. His reserve arises from his knowledge that

> [c]orporate industry has realized a consumer desire and has nurtured a taste that it has extensively exploited and continues to exhaust. In the process, it has distorted aspects of Black culture and hip hop culture. Often highlighted are those aspects of rap which, despite their seemingly anti-establishment, angry, and street-like presentations, (1) do not threaten the status quo, (2) reinforce negative stereotypes about Blacks, (3) manipulate these stereotypes to increase sales, and (4) move rap music further away from its grassroots origins (22-23).[48]

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[47] I take the term 'raptivists' from Charise Cheney's essay "Representin' God: Rap, Religion and the Politics of a Culture." Cheney uses the term in reference to rap artists who "use rap music as a forum for politicking" (1).

[48] Hip Hop culture, which includes graffiti and breakdancing as well as rap music, is rooted in both African American and African Caribbean youth cultures and functions as a site from within which Black artists critique the institutions, policies and practices that enable and encourage the exclusion of their points of view and experiences from official transcripts. Graffiti and breakdancing offer excellent examples of such usages. Like rap music, these other components of hip hop culture involve appropriating public spaces and employing them as 'canvases' on which to inscribe the texts of unofficial history, or hidden transcripts. In Rose's discussion of graffiti, for instance, she notes that,

Kitwana criticizes Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s testimony at the 1990 censorship trial of 2LiveCrew's Luther Campbell in which Gates claimed that lewd selections from Campbell's album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* did not advocate sexual violence, but were rather acts of "signifying." Gates stated: "There is no call to violence here. What you hear is humor, great joy and boisterousness. It's a joke. It's parody, and parody is one of the most venerated forms of art" (Kitwana 5). Kitwana takes Gates to task for inferring that "the use of sexist and misogynist language as a joke is a phenomenon of Black culture" (5-6). Although I agree that Gates may have overstated the case, I wonder if Gates' arguably far-fetched assertion was, to some extent, a response to pressures similar to those experienced by female rappers whose responses to the lyrics were also solicited. For example, Rose notes MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, and Sister Souljah's refusal to criticize the sexist content of lyrics by their male colleagues, preferring instead to advocate free speech (150). Rose does not read their responses as evidence that "they did not find the lyrics offensive," but rather of their awareness that their remarks were at risk of being recuperated by public transcripts in ways that would make them complicit in further efforts to demonize Black men (149-150). A similar logic leads me to question if Gates' facile characterization of the

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"[a]lthough graffiti as a social movement (i.e., writing names, symbols, and images on public facades) first emerged in New York during the late 1960's, it is not until almost a decade later that it began to develop elaborate styles and widespread visibility. . . . By the mid-1970's, graffiti took on new focus and complexity. No longer a matter of simple tagging, graffiti began to develop elaborate individual styles, themes formats, and techniques most of which were designed to increase visibility, individual identity, and status. Themes in the larger works included hip-hop slang, characterizations of b-boys, rap lyrics, and hip hop fashion" (41-42). Further, in her discussion of breakdancing, Rose writes: "At the height of disco's popularity, a new style of dance and musical pastiche emerged that used disco music to focus on the break points, to highlight and extend the breaks in and between songs. At these break points in the DJ's performance, the dancers would *breakdance*, executing moves that imitated the rupture in rhythmic continuity as it was highlighted in the musical break. . . . Breaking, originally referring only to a particular group of dance moves executed during the break beat in a DJ's rap mixes, has since come to include a number of related movements and dances (e.g. electric boogie and up-

lyrics might also have been a tactic by which he avoided being used by the legal system and the media as a "political baton to beat male rappers over the head" (Rose 150). The uncharacteristic simplicity of Gates' associations enabled him to protect the maligned images of the music and its artists. However, his readiness to forge connections between 2LiveCrew's work and an African American aesthetic tradition ran the risk of diluting the richness of that tradition in the public imagination. It is important that critics heed Kitwana's caution so as to avoid representing rap as a monolithic art form in which no variances in quality, content, or context need be acknowledged or addressed.

Indeed, as Kitwana points out, much of rap's 'bad rap' can be attributed to critics' failures to draw distinctions between its various forms. Keeping in mind the extent to which artists' work overlaps each of the categories, even on the same album or within the same song, he suggests three ways to categorize rap music according to its lyrical content. First, "recreational" rap comes the closest to sounding like R&B, tends to focus on themes of sex and love, and frequently provides a forum for artists to engage in acts of boasting, bragging, signifying and the dozens. It is also the form least likely to generate controversy and to receive play on mainstream radio stations as "dance" music. The Fresh Prince, MC Hammer and Vanilla Ice are figures whose work is most readily identified with this category. The second category that Kitwana identifies is "conscious rap." The lyrics of "conscious" rap, also known as "message" or "political" rap, are informed by political concerns about social and racial issues and grow out of the artists' desire to raise others' awareness about those issues. In rap

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rock) that take place at various points in the music" (47). For a discussion of the dynamic relationship between fashion and hip hop see George's *hiphop america* PP 156-165.

of this type, radical critiques of repressive state apparatuses are carried out and political activists such as Malcolm X are often referred to or quoted. Ernest Allen, in his essay "Making the Strong Survive: The Contours and Contradictions of Message Rap," identifies three sub-categories of "conscious" rap: the Islamic nationalist orientation apparent in the work of Poor Righteous Teachers and Eric B. and Rakim; the cultural-political nationalism of groups such as Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions; and specific, message-oriented work apparent in the "more earthy gangsta rap" of NWA, Ice Cube, and Ice T (162).[49] The 'hardcore' sound of some "conscious" rap often results in its being mistaken for that which falls into the third category that Kitwana identifies as "Sex-Violence Rap." "Sex-Violence Rap," which is also more commonly referred to as "gangsta rap" or "reality rap." The lyrics of this kind of rap frequently contain sexist or homophobic remarks and are often targeted for promoting violence against women, homosexuals, other Black people, and police officers. Images of the gangster and references to guns proliferate throughout. Sex-Violence, or gangsta rap is the sort that generates the most controversy, calls for censorship, and is largely to blame for rap's bad reputation in the mainstream media (Kitwana 32-35).[50] The extent to which artists' work overlaps each of these categories

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[49] Allen notes that "core values articulated in a given rap message, no matter the origin of individual rappers, tend to be socially rooted in the daily lives of marginalized African American youth—in contrast to, say, those of black industrial workers or of the educated black middle class" (162). Although my emphasis on the everyday in Chapter Four takes me in other directions, it is important to note the extent to which the everyday informs many rap narratives.

[50] Nelson George, in *Hiphop America* (1998), argues that gangsta rap is an outgrowth of the crack plague in inner cities. The drug's extraordinarily addictive quality made crack dealing a profitable venture and led to the development of intensely competitive and violent underground economies, accompanied by an increase in gun possession among dealers and citizens alike. As I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, the crack trade also contributed to the alarming increase in the number of Black men incarcerated. According to George, the unprecedented rates of incarceration of Black men effected "the mentality of black culture" in the form of a "dispassionate view of violence and overall social alienation," fostered by incarceration and disseminated by prisoners throughout the

creates a polemical critical environment in which work that is less nuanced, both politically and artistically, attracts the attention of cultural moralists, situating critics such as Gates in the invidious position of having to defend the worst in ways that make it all the more difficult to attract serious attention to the best.

It is possible and worthwhile to call attention to compelling links between rap and an African American aesthetic tradition. Chuck D says as much on Public Enemy's 1988 C.D. *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*. Consider the beginning of the song "Prophets of Rage": "With vice I hold the mike device/ With force I keep it away of course/ And I'm keepin' you from sleepin'/ And on the stage I rage/ And I'm rollin'/ To the poor, I pour it on in metaphors/ Not bluffin', it's nothing we ain't did before." Rose also locates rap within those performative traditions, including slave dances, blues lyrics, jazz, Mardi Gras parades, and Jamaican patois, which combine pleasure with ingenious and frequently disguised critiques of the powerful (99). As Rose writes:

> Under social conditions in which sustained frontal attacks on powerful groups are strategically unwise or successfully contained, oppressed people use language, dance, and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion. . . . These cultural responses to oppression are not safety valves that protect and sustain the machines of oppression. Quite to the contrary, these dances, languages, and musics produce communal bases of knowledge about

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community (42-43). With respect to the homophobia evident in some rap lyrics, George makes the point that, for many young Black men, prison has become a rite of passage into manhood that permanently alters the ways in which they go about their sexual and romantic relationships. He writes: "[w]hile homosexuality is widely condemned in the black community, the committing of homosexual acts behind bars is rarely commented on. Because they occur often through rape or psychological coercion they are not viewed as acts of sexual orientation but manifestations of control and domination, both reflections consistent with a . . . gangster mentality. . . . As an example of how values shaped by prison influence behavior outside it, sex becomes about power, not affection. . . . For some men, in and out of jail since adolescence, jail begins to supercede the presence of all other environments. Suspicion of women, loyalty to the crew, adoption of a stone face in confronting the world, hatred of authority—all major themes of gangsta rap—owe their presence of lyrics and impact on audiences to the large number of African-American men incarcerated in the '90s" (44).

> social conditions, communal interpretations of them and quite often serve as the cultural glue that fosters communal resistance. (99-100)

In the antebellum United States, for instance, the use of drums raised the fear and ire of many slave holders to the point that "talking drums" were frequently banned on plantations for fear that slaves might use them to generate and to communicate during insurrection (Jones 91, Webber 217).[51] Patricia Washington and Lynda Dixon Shaver point to similarities between rap music and the blues when they note that both are primarily verse and secondarily music, both evolve from an African American oral tradition, and both describe "pain, struggle, and survival despite periods of hopelessness" (167). And jazz, which represents one of the United States' most important cultural contributions to the world, invoked antagonistic and fear-driven reactions in the 1920s for many of the same reasons that rap does now. Kathy Ogren, in *The Jazz Revolution: Twenties America and the Meaning of Jazz* (1989), reminds us that jazz was greeted with both criticism and praise. Its worst critics, for instance, "dismissed it as noise," and deprecated its lower-class black origins. In contrast, jazz fans considered the music both "exciting entertainment" and "an antidote for repressive industrial society" (Ogren 7). Accordingly, Ogren contends,

> the circumstances under which it was performed embodied social change . . . Americans shared a common perception that jazz had transforming qualities that could last beyond the time of a song and the space of a cabaret act. For many Americans, to argue about jazz was to argue about the nature of change itself. (6-7)

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[51] John Miller Chernoff explains in *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms*, that "in traditional African music, [drum] rhythms themselves are a specific text. When the earliest European travelers described drum-signaling between villages, they assumed that the beating was a code. In reality, the drums actually speak the language of the tribe" (75).

Finally, Gayle Jones makes a similar argument when she cites Kimberly Benston's claim that "jazz music engages European-American culture in a revolt" that threatens "Western history and civilization," and posits that perhaps the "Western artist *should* legitimately hear and respond to [jazz]. . . as a battle" (47, original emphasis). The fear-driven prohibitions against the use of the talking drums, the form and nature of the blues, and resistance to both the form and content of jazz are replicated in debates about and responses to rap music today.

III

Houston Baker, in his essay "Scene . . . Not Heard," discusses other challenges that African Americans have faced in their struggles to affect, or inflect, hegemonic versions of history with the sounds of their own voices and the narratives of their own experiences. Baker's comparison of rap music with the African American slave narrative offers astute insight into the struggles for interpretive and discursive power that take place in and between public and hidden transcripts. For example, he characterizes the slave narrative as a "classic site of what might be called the 'scene of violence' in American discourse" (38). According to Baker, this "scene plays itself out . . . with infinite variation in American history. But in slave narratives and Afro-American history in general, it shapes itself according to a unique logic of sound and silence, agency and powerlessness" (38). Playing on the notion of being seen but not heard, Baker argues that the efficacy of the slave narrative was compromised by readers' refusal to read them as "lyrical repudiation[s] of the master's exclusive right to meaningful being in the world" (41). In other words, "the *interpretation* of [slaves'] narratives . . . was the exclusive prerogative" of white

readers (Baker 40, original emphasis). Such prerogative rendered slave narratives and their authors "scenic" but not audible (Baker 39). Baker associates such "scening" with the literal objectification and silencing of Black people and contends that the term "scening" still accurately describes white America's efforts to construct and to control the images and voices of African American males (38).

Baker cites the 1991 police beating of Rodney King and its aftermath as an example of such continuity because King was denied interpretive prerogative over the scene in which he had the principal role. Baker notes that King's silence during and after the ordeal seemed deafening given the presence of the video camera and the overwhelming degree to which "[m]oral pundits and paparazzi took up his cause" (43).[52] To date, King has not discussed the particulars of the incident in any detail with the media. He insists that he will say all that he has left unsaid in the autobiography that he claims to be writing (Haring B9). King's silence about the beating and the trials needs to be considered alongside the ironic manner in which his cries of pain and the threats and insults spoken by the officers who inflicted it, not to mention the sounds of the beating itself, were twice overwritten: first by King's forced silence wrought by playing the various versions of the videotaped beating without audio; and second by the defense attorneys in the first trial who "put into words the fears of white America: they made the movements of Rodney King's body on the ground into signs of a Black refusal to comply with the white social order"

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[52] Baker discusses the strategic manner in which the infamous video of the police officers beating Mr. King was taken over by the defense attorneys for the officers and played for the jury in ways which made it seem that had "this brutish black [Mr. King] been allowed to go 'uncorrected,' why 'we' would surely have been enslaved. For he was always threateningly *controlling* the action" (44, original emphasis). Baker goes on to argue that the attorneys' reading of the scene enabled them to serve and to protect their powers of interpretation and authority in order to "preserve the tale of violence and control in its primal form" (44).

(Fiske, *Media Matters* 132).[53] In the end, Fiske contends, "it was the video that stood trial. . . . Rodney King never appeared; his presence, which pervaded the trial in the courtroom and around the nation, was a video presence, a body of electronic dots" (*Media Matters* 128). Defense attorneys employed the potentially liberating transcript of the video to relegate King to the scene(s) of violence produced by both the beating itself and the courtroom actions that ensued. In this way, as 'readers' of the video recording, they stole from him the interpretive authority necessary to mobilize fully the power of his videotaped experience within the public transcript.[54]

King's (arguably fear-driven) silence notwithstanding, it is compelling and pertinent that he started his own music label and embarked on a career as a rap artist and as a producer of rap music in 1998 (Haring B9).[55] Although King acknowledges that now, more than ever, people need to "all just get along," he insists that he does not intend to use his record company to further his message (Haring B9). As he puts it reassuringly—to whites at least—"its sound 'won't condone violence' and will be 'positive. We just want to make music,' he says. 'We just want to go to work'"

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[53] Fiske, in *Media Matters: Race and Gender in U.S. Politics* (1996), makes the point that there were at least two videos around which the Rodney King incident was manipulated. Fiske explains: "First there was the low-tech video shot by George Holliday . . . . Then there was the technologized version of this used by the defense in both trials: computers enhanced it, technology froze its individual frames, slowed or reversed its motion, and inscribed explanatory arrows and circles upon it" (127).

[54] In the second trial, King was allowed to describe his movements on the ground. Attorneys represented his movements as his failure to submit to police. In contrast, King explained, "I was trying to stay alive, sir—trying to stay alive, and they never gave me a chance to stay still. I never had a chance to stay still" (Fiske, *Media Matters* 132).

[55] King's interest in a career in the rap music industry predates the 1991 beating. Indeed, King and his friends had been writing lyrics and listening to *De La Soul* in the car on the evening that the police chase and the beating occurred (Haring B9). King has used the 3.8 million dollars that he received from Los Angeles as compensation for his beating injuries to fund the start-up of his record company. King's voice appears on *Stranded*'s album which also featured a song called *4/29/92* dedicated to the starting date of the Los Angeles riots that began after the first trial in which the officers were acquitted.

(Haring B9). King's silence generally and his insistence on the benign nature of the music his label will produce specifically, suggest that King, for reasons that are understandable, has yet fully to (re)claim the interpretive power and agency that the police and the media stole from him so publicly less than a decade ago. Although he is reluctant to produce rap music of the sort that is most overtly political or controversial, King's involvement signifies his equally strong reluctance to be complicit in the 'scening' of American violence. His investment of some of the 3.8 million dollar settlement that he received as compensation for the beating signals his support for a genre through which artists conduct and call for hearings against police brutality, race and class-related violence, and social and economic disenfranchisement.[56] As a producer and an artist, King cannot determine whether the music that he writes and produces will reach the ears of "effective readers" who will exercise their interpretive prerogative in ways that further politically conscious rap-related projects (Baker 41). At the very least, however, I think it fair to say that his roles offer him a significantly better chance of producing and disseminating effective histories that will be heard than he was given in the courtroom.

IV

Peter Noel, in "Bring the Noise," addresses some of the complexities and contradictions that accompany the increasing commercialization of rap as artists struggle to negotiate their simultaneous roles as capitalists, performers, activists, and

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[56] As Rose stresses with respect to rap and the performance traditions that preceded it, "[t]hese cultural responses to oppression are not safety valves that protect and sustain the machines of oppression. Quite to the contrary, these dances, languages, and musics produce communal bases of knowledge about social conditions, communal interpretations of them and quite often serve as the cultural glue that fosters communal resistance" (99-100).

artists (138-142). For instance, Noel acknowledges the connections that groups such as KRS-One and L.L. Cool J have forged between their work and community causes. Images of the "ghetto" or the "hood" are central characteristics of narratives about the lives and struggles of disenfranchised young Black men. The emphases on race and class struggles defined the "cutting edge of rap music" during the late 1980s and early 1990s to the extent that rappers who chose to focus attention elsewhere were "regarded as imposters of the tradition" (Boyd *Am I Black* 41).[57] It seems at times that, on account of "an intense combination of media manipulation and artistic culpability, the issue of class struggle has been reduced to mere spectacle" (Boyd *Am I Black* 41). The ghetto becomes an object of voyeurism for audiences seeking primarily to be entertained and thus detracts attention from artists who invoke the ghetto in poignant and politically charged narratives committed to critically interrogating domination and oppression.[58]

A spokesperson for Black Star cautions that the integrity of rap music and the freedom of its artists depend on artists' willingness to "oppose the coon show aesthetics purveyed by a horde of self-proclaimed players and gangstas" who employ the ghetto as the playground of the rap industry (Cooper 70). Similarly, Noel questions the integrity of rap artists who either perform the role of the "studio

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[57] The double-edged effects of the pressure to emphasize issues pertaining to life in the ghetto were played out in the controversy surrounding white rapper Vanilla Ice in 1989. Vanilla Ice, a commercially successful artist, claimed to have close associations to impoverished Black neighborhoods in an effort to cast an aura of "authenticity" and "hipness" around himself and his music (Rose 11). It was eventually revealed that Vanilla Ice had fabricated his stories about growing up in Black neighborhoods and associating primarily with Black people and, in fact, had been raised in a middle-class home in Dallas, Texas (Rose 11-12). This revelation led to Vanilla Ice being maligned by the rap community.

[58] Robin Kelley makes the point that, for middle-class white consumers, gangsta rap "unintentionally serves the same role as blaxploitation films of the 1970s or, for that matter, gangster films of any

gangster" in ways that further efforts on the part of the dominant culture to pathologize the ghetto and the people who live there, or undertake their activist work primarily in recording studios. He notes the frustration of political activists who criticize rap artists for being reluctant to state their positions on controversial issues or to financially support activist projects for fear of tarnishing their relationships to their record labels. Mos Def responds to such criticisms when he makes the point that, "[y]ou don't have to be out there on the front lines, but you can definitely buy some ammunition for the cats in the foxholes. You can write that check, man, and very privately change things" (Noel 140). Coolio knows from first-hand experience how difficult it is to negotiate the fine line between so-called "coon show aesthetics" and the aesthetic characteristics of rap that provide some of its great market appeal. Coolio admits to having "taken a lot of heat in some circles for not staying with a rougher edge" in favor of using the genre to address issues such as "respecting women, earning a living, paying child support and practicing safe sex," as well as advocating anti-drug messages (Marine C8). In this regard, Coolio, like so many other rap artists, has learned that his involvement in the rap music industry represents something of a double-edged sword. As Lindon Barrett puts it in his essay "Dead Men Printed: Tupac Shakur, Biggie Small, and Hip-Hop Eulogy," the "risk produced at the site of young black people and their words and postures must be foreclosed because of the absolute risk of other options and change lurking in/beyond their bodies, an absolute risk capitalism as culture and culture as capitalism irresolvably wants and never wants to embrace" (310).

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generation. It attracts listeners for whom the 'ghetto' is a place of adventure, unbridled violence, erotic fantasy, and/or an imaginary alternative to suburban boredom" (*Race Rebels* 191).

Sean Combs (a.k.a. Puff Daddy a.k.a. P. Diddy), who is both a producer and an artist, views his personal success as a sign of the industry's potential to help Black men make headway into spaces where, as he puts it, "no young black man has gone before" ("Big Bucks for Puffy" C1). As the President and CEO of the Bad Boy Entertainment conglomerate, Combs orchestrates the careers of numerous Black artists including rappers Mase, Boyz II Men, Busta Rhymes, and Lil' Kim, as well as more mainstream performers such as Mariah Carey and Aretha Franklin. Combs views his financial success—Bad Boy Entertainment has sold more than $100 million worth of music in the last five years—as a sign that he is succeeding in his effort to construct a positive legacy for young Black men. [59] He is particularly resistant to white America's impulse to contain him within the category of "Black music maker" and aspires to one day be known as "a music-maker that was so incredible that he represented all of culture" (Cobo-Hanlon C4). As he puts it, "[y]ou're not going to be able to label me" (Cobo-Hanlon C4). For Combs, in other words, the success of his company is a sign that he is successfully resisting efforts to compartmentalize him within a racialized category.[60] Although it is difficult to fault Combs for the efforts that he has made to foster the upward mobility of himself and a small number of

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[59] According to *Forbes* magazine's 1998 list of the 40 highest-paid entertainers, Master P enjoyed similar economic success as the CEO of No Limit Records, earning $56.5 million ($225 million yadas… C2). Recently, Master P, already a sports agent, purchased his own telephone company No Limit Communications: "NLC PLANS TO START WITH PRE-PAID TELECOM SERVICES IN EIGHT MAJOR American Cities and to expand into 160 markets after the first year. With a $4.5 million US payroll and 215 employees, NLC hopes to gross $30.7 million in the first year . . ." (Master P has Own Phone Company C2)

[60] Combs has not escaped criticism entirely. He has been accused by members of CHHANGE (Conscious Hip Hop Activism Necessary for Global Empowerment) of enabling the profiling of young people by the ways in which he markets his clothing lines (Noel "Bring the Noise" 140). More recently, after an incident that took place in a New York club in which three people were injured by gunshots, Combs stood trial for possession of an illegal firearm and for bribery. He was acquitted on all charges.

Black performers, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that his personal successes do not correlate with changes of a similar magnitude in the lives of most of the young Black men for whom he considers himself to be a role model.

S. Craig Watkins, in *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (1998), takes note of the various ways that the commercialization of the rap music industry situates artists uniquely to be heard rather than 'scene.' Watkins argues against the commonly held notion that the commercialization of rap music undermines its potential as a site of resistance to hegemonic control and containment. Indeed, he goes so far as to assert that the contention that "commercial culture subverts the intentions and resistive qualities of hip hop is, at best, misguided" (69). He notes that the explicitly subversive qualities of rap music did not develop until the genre became commercial (73). As he explains, "the earliest rap recordings were mostly first-person narratives that boasted about the acquisition of status-conferring objects: jewelry, designer clothing, and women. . . . they did not embody the counterideological themes that would later be labeled 'message rap'" (73). He also notes that the appearance of groups such as Public Enemy on the rap scene in the later 1980s coincided with both an increased level of commercialization and increasingly political rap lyrics. Watkins argues, therefore, that the increasing commodification of the genre actually "nourished" what was theretofore an impoverished form of resistance (73). In this respect, Watkins views the economic success of rap artists as an escape from the social and economic structures that structure a carceral network for Black men (72). At the same time, Watkins notes the ironies that attend young Black men's involvement in hip hop culture generally, and

the rap music industry specifically (73). He claims that hip hop "has been this generation's most prominent means for making good on the long promises of the civil rights movement" (73). He reads the participation of Black youth in the commodified rap industry not as a sign of their surrender to capitalism, but rather as a method by which they attempt to counter its crippling effects by exploiting the market for Black cultural productions (70-71).[61] As Watkins puts it, "even though black youth turn their symbolic practices and creative skills into work that reproduces the master ideal of capital accumulation (a principle that historically works to their disadvantage), it is work that enables some to escape the serial employment and menial labor widely regarded as humiliating, stigmatizing, and oppressive" (72).

Still, efforts to censor rap artists' voices come from public moralists and defenders of so-called family values such as Dan Quayle, Bob Dole, and C. Delores Tucker. As Michael Dyson sees it, such opponents frequently make all rap music the scapegoat for what they see as increasing levels of moral corruption, including the decline of so-called family values (183). Dyson calls into question the foundation on which such critiques rest with the argument that "[t]oo often, 'family values' is a code for a narrow view of how families work, who gets to count as a legitimate domestic unit, and consequently, what values are crucial to their livelihood" (183). Moreover, he continues:

> To be sure, there have been severe assaults on American families and their values, but they have not come mainly from Hollywood, but from

[61] Watkins calls attention to sociologist David Brain's definition of cultural production which coheres with Watkin's understanding of the complexities that arise from the seemingly paradoxical combination of oppositional narratives and commodification of rap music. Cultural production, he writes, is the "collective production of skills and practices which enable social actors to make sense of their lives, articulate an identity, and resist with creative energy the apparent dictates of structural conditions they nonetheless reproduce" (50-51).

> Washington with the dismantling of the Great Society. Cruel cuts in social programs for the neediest, an upward redistribution of wealth to the rich, and an unprincipled conservative political campaign to demonize poor black mothers and their children have left latter-day D.W. Griffiths in the dust. Many of gangsta rap's most vocal black critics (such as Tucker) fail to see how the alliances they forge with conservative white politicians such as Bennett and Dole are plagued with problems. Bennet and Dole have put up roadblocks to many legislative and political measures that would enhance the fortunes of the black poor they now claim in part to speak for. Their outcry resounds as crocodile tears from the corridors of power paved by faith. (183-184)

Critics too often overlook the fact that hip hop culture generally, and rap music specifically, offer youth a place from which to form alternative identities and regain social status in communities where traditional institutional support systems have deteriorated along with the concrete indicators of their presence (Rose 34). At least two rap artists, 2 Live Crew's Luther Campbell and Tupac Shakur, have forthrightly acknowledged what many critics will not—that their participation and success in the rap music industry offered them a legal means of making a living (and a good one) in places where the possibilities for upward mobility are limited at best.[62] Campbell, for instance, wrote to the *New York Post* in response to claims that he was broke and selling answering machine messages for five dollars a piece: "Under no circumstances am I doing bad . . . If I do go broke, you and other writers like you will be the first ones that I will come rob" ("2 Live Crew Star" B6). Similarly, in the title track from "Strictly for My N.I.G.G.A.Z." Tupac addresses his critics when he raps: "pick up my shit or I'll be back doin' stickups. I better see five stars next to my picture." Both Campbell and Tupac point directly to the irony implicit in much of the criticism about rap when they argue that critics ought not to be afraid of rap artists

who have found a means by which to support themselves well, but should rather fear those whom poverty and unemployment force to commit crimes to put food on their tables and roofs over their heads. As Michel Gilmore contends in *Rolling Stone*, "rap gave voice and presence to truths that almost no other form of art or reportage was willing to accommodate . . . if hardcore rap were to disappear tomorrow, these conditions would still exist" (81). Implicit in Campbell, Tupac, and Gilmore's statements is their recognition, though I think not a critique, of the ways that capitalism structures a cycle of containment in which Black men must choose between being the victims of its oppressive effects, or becoming complicit in the system that produces them.

Nonetheless, critics continue to voice ever-louder demands to censure the lyrics, and, in some cases, to stop the production and distribution of gangsta rap altogether. In part, such agendas seem motivated by a desire to deflect attention away from the political insights and revolutionary visions that underscore a good deal of rap music. Dyson makes this observation when he writes:

> gangsta rap's greatest 'sin' may be that it tells the truth about practices and beliefs that rappers hold in common with the mainstream and with black elites. This music has embarrassed mainstream society and black bourgeois culture. It has forced us to confront the demands of racial representation that plague and provoke black artists. It has also exposed our polite sexism and our disregard for gay men and lesbians. We should not continue to blame gangsta rap for ills that existed long before hip-hop uttered its first syllable. (186)

It is an understatement to say that rap's 'bad rap' stems from mere embarrassment on the part of whites and public moralists. Indeed, it also reflects the fear and loathing of African American male agency, sexuality, and autonomy that have always existed at

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[62] Tupac Shakur is referred to by several names including 2Pac, Tupac, and Shakur. Hereafter I refer to

the root of American race relations. A significant part of the backlash against rap, then, stems from a broader desire to circumscribe the physical, social, and economic mobility of African American males by any means, and in as many ways as, possible. Rose's analysis of a "particularly hostile *Los Angeles Times* review of the Public Enemy 1990 summer tour at the San Diego Sports Arena" demonstrates the degree to which the sight and sound of Black pleasure inspire fear in whites and provoke responses that recall a history of defining African Americans, and especially African American males, in sub-human ways (137). The reviewer, John D'Agostino, characterized Public Enemy's music as monotonous, deafening, and hypnotic and claimed that it "turned the audience of 6,500 into a single-minded moveable beast" (137). Rose surmises that because D'Agostino was "[u]nable to negotiate the relationship between his fear of the audience and the wave of sound that supported black pleasure while it pushed him to the margins, [he] interprets black pleasure as dangerous and automatic" (138). That Black people enjoying a concert can inspire such language in a review makes the extreme measures deemed necessary and appropriate to ensure that African American men are 'scene' and not heard that much less surprising.

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The deep, bass sounds, profanity, references to violence, and the explicit, often angry, calls for change by rap artists bring to the forefront white America's fear of Black males. As Barrett notes, "when black people in large numbers have become relatively assertive in their pursuit of a fair share of the good things in life . . . white people have proved themselves ready for violence" to the extent that many "resist

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him as Tupac.

fully imagining that those 'fans' of gangsta rap 'rooted in the ghetto' are acutely aware of 'another [way of] life' and, what is more, are often fully cognizant of their violent, though 'reasoned' disbarment from it" (312). Accordingly, the historical abuses to which Black males have been subject represent a key focus for rap artists who use the genre to construct effective histories. The right to control, to define, to use and to abuse Black men is what is at stake in the often-deadly battle in which the police, critics, and rap artists are engaged. Take, for example, Ice Cube's song "Who Got the Camera" from his 1992 C.D. *The Predator*. "Who got the Camera" opens with a collage of voices that are intended to represent both white and Black speakers. A female dispatcher's voice opens the song with the repeated phrase "see if there's a black and white that can do a traffic light." The dispatcher's voice repeats the phrase progressively more quickly until the words blur together and it sounds as though she is asking "see if there's a black and white that can do a drive by." The lyrical shift produced by the technologically-manipulated dispatcher's voice signifies on the ways in which the anti-crime rhetoric masks racist, often homicidal agendas aimed at Black males. That is, the shift inverts white America's tendency to define drive-by shootings as crimes associated with Black male delinquents. In this way, Ice Cube links the notion of a drive-by to actions of police brutality that represent institutionally prescribed and pre-meditated patterns of aggressive behavior towards Black males.[63]

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[63] As I complete this chapter two other incidents involving police brutality have taken place in Philadelphia and Lawrenceville, Ga. In Philadelphia, ten police officers were videotaped as they beat Thomas Jones, a Black male whom the police had already shot five times in both the stomach and the arm (Morton A10). Interestingly, despite the obvious similarities between the Jones beating and the Rodney King beating, John Timoney, the City Police Commissioner rejects such comparisons and emphasizes that "we're not going to make determinations solely on that video" (Morton A10). Mr. Jones' family plans to sue the Philadelphia police force. In the Lawrenceville incident videotapes were

"Who Got the Camera" goes on to relate the story of a Black man who is pulled over by the police after doing a U-turn on the grounds that "[t]here was a robbery and the nigger looked just like you." The narrator relates his subsequent beating by the officers whose agenda Ice Cube combines with the narrator's in the chorus: "Oh please, oh please, oh please, just gimme just one more hit/ Oh please, oh please, just gimme just one more hit/who got the camera?" He also notes that the presence of a crowd of witnesses offers him little in the way of protection unless one of them happens to have a camera on hand to record the events. In the story that the narrator relates, the presence of witnesses seems to have a minimal effect on the outcome of the beating. Indeed, he feels quite certain that "[i]f the crowd weren't around they would've shot me." By invoking the relative importance of a camera compared to a crowd of presumably African American witnesses, Ice Cube addresses the irony of the vast impact of the Rodney King case. As George Church put it in the May 11, 1992 issue of *Time*:

> To an extent that whites can barely even imagine—because it so rarely happens to them—police brutality to many blacks is an ever present threat to their bodies and lives. Indeed, few things more vividly illustrate the extent to which whites and blacks live in different worlds than their reactions to police brutality. A white who was sickened by the tape of King's beating would probably have said to himself something like, Look what they're doing to that poor guy. A black would be almost sure to say, My God, that could be me. . . . This time [in the Rodney King case] many blacks apparently hoped it would be different. After all, this was not merely the word of a black with an arrest record against the word of one or more cops: this time there was hard evidence in the form of a tape on which the jurors, like hundreds

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shot of officers with their guns drawn pulling a man from his truck at which point they proceeded to punch and kick him (Morton A10).

> of TV viewers around the world, could actually see the beating. (25-26)[64]

African American males, in other words, are well aware of the very real possibility that they might be a victim of police brutality at least once during their lifetime and that there is not likely to be anyone on hand with a camera rolling.[65] There also exists another very real possibility: police officers who perpetrate such violence may never be held accountable for their actions.[66] "Who Got the Camera" therefore makes a

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[64] Fiske, in *Media Matters*, accounts for such different perspectives in his discussion of 'situational logic.' He writes: "Rodney King's behavior was categorically different in white and Black discourse. Discourse is, of course, continuous with social experience, so discursive differences are always social ones. African Americans knew instantly the trouble that Rodney King was in merely by seeing him surrounded by cops; the brutal beating that followed, was, in light of their experience, the logical and predictable outcome. Many whites, however, with their quite different social experience, were unable to see that situated 'logic' and thus had to look to King's behavior for an explanation. The defense lawyers capitalized on this and turned much of the trial into an investigation of what Rodney King did rather than what the police officers did. For them, the beating could be made to make sense only through white categorizations of Rodney King's behavior" (135).

[65] Fiske relates the story of an incident in Detroit in which a Black motorist, Malice Green, was pulled over and beaten to death by police officers. Fiske writes: "But there was no video of the scene; the incident was made known verbally both through literacy (the media) and oralcy among African Americans, but the inopportune absence of a camera prevented its hypervisualization. It could not, therefore, become a media event with its own hyperreality" (*Media Matters* 137).

[66] The Los Angeles riots that followed the first trial and acquittal of the police officers who had beaten Rodney King stand as evidence of the Black community's anger about what seemed both then and now to be a fact of African American life that white America has a vested interest in barring from the public transcript. Such anger was also apparent in St. Petersburg, Florida in October of 1996 when police declared a 72 hour 'state of emergency' after a white police officer shot and killed a Black driver. The ensuing riots led to Black youth being ordered by police to stay off of the streets and restricted gun and gasoline sales ("Crackdown"). City officials were surprised at the riot that took place. As one of the officials put it: "The feeling was that things had greatly improved, but we could have been wrong" ("Crackdown"). In contrast, the riot came as no surprise to Black people living in the area where the riots took place. As one African American woman told reporters: "The police harass you for nothing . . . People have got fed up. That's what they should have burned down, the police station and everyone inside" ("Crackdown). Further north, according to an article in *Village Voice* in June 1998, Black motorists refer to the New Jersey Turnpike "as 'White Man's Pass.' . . . Since 1988—and possibly long before that—state police have been 'engaged in a program of racial targeting' on the New Jersey Turnpike, according to court documents in a pending case against 19 black men and women [stopped for Driving While Black] who, in a joint [counter] motion, claimed they were illegally targeted, stopped, searched, and arrested by troopers on the turnpike in Gloucester County between January 1988 and April 1991. Allegedly, the troopers target blacks, especially those driving luxury cars such as BMWs, Mercedes-Benzes, and Lexuses. The state police assert that it is a trumped-up conflict and deny they practice such a policy; if anything, they insist, their actions amount to nothing more than aggressive enforcement of traffic regulations. But for blacks, who experts say are nearly five times more likely than whites to be stopped on the turnpike, it is a case of constantly being picked on for

succinct point about the value, or lack thereof, assigned to African American autobiographical accounts in the absence of a video text.[67]

One would think that it would be considerably more difficult though, as the King case proved, far from impossible to make a video fit the parameters of the public transcript. Yet Elizabeth Alexander, in "'Can You be BLACK and look at this?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," notes the ways that the video of the King beating was manipulated in the courtroom so as to support the LAPD's version of the events that transpired the night of the beating. Her description of the language used to describe Rodney King coheres with that employed by D'Agostino in the review of a rap concert I discussed earlier in this chapter. Alexander relates how in the first trial in Simi Valley "a language of black male bestiality and hypervirility, along with myths of drug abuse and 'superhuman strength,' was deployed" (93). She elaborates:

> The defense in the Simi Valley trial employed a familiar language of black bestiality to construct Rodney King as a threat to the officers. The lawyers also slowed down the famous videotape so that it no

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DWB" (Noel "Driving" 39-40). Efforts on the part of members of the New Jersey-based organization Black Cops against Police Brutality to get state troopers to police themselves have led to members of BCPB being "threatened with arrest by the Turnpike Authority if they violate "restrictions on filming, photographing and videotaping on the turnpike" (Noel "Driving" 40). Clearly, despite the potential for video and photographic texts to be manipulated by agents of the public transcript in ways that affect African American defendants adversely, the production of such texts continues to represent at least somewhat of a threat.

[67] Hazel Carby, in *Race Men*, offers a compelling example of how even radical lyrics taken from rap songs can be distorted and made to uphold, rather than to subvert, the public transcript. In reference to a scene in the film "Grand Canyon" she writes: "[M]usic becomes *the* prime vehicle for representing a cultural war which has encoded within it the political potential for a larger civil war. The rap group NWA (Niggaz with Attitude) is pitted against Zevon in a symbolic enactment of Kasdan's narrative of race and nation which is about to unfold: a liberal white suburban male confronts a 'posse' of young black urban males. The musical battle both produces and accompanies the wider class and racialized meanings of the scene, meanings which in turn both produce and confirm ideological beliefs about the 'problem' of the inner city, of what is wrong with America. The skewed perspective of this cinematic confrontation is revealed in the unequal editing of the musical 'war.' In contrast to the verbal and musical fragments of NWA's 'Quiet on the Set,' the audience hears coherent narrative selections from the Zevon lyrics. We do not hear sequential sections of a verse, or even complete sentences, of the NWA lyrics; the narrative coherence of 'Quiet on the Set' has been deliberately disrupted" (172-173).

> longer existed in "real time" but rather in a slow dance of stylized movement that could as easily be read as self-defense as a threat. There was neither the sound of falling blows nor screams from King or from witnesses on the slowed-down tape. (109)[68]

The closing lines of "Who Got the Camera"—"Fuckin' police gettin' badder/but if I had a camera the shit wouldn't matter . Ya'll done did it this time, uh/who the fuck got my nine"—offer a similar critique of the ways that transcripts of African American experience are at risk of distortion when whites take advantage of their prerogative to interpret them within public transcripts. On the one hand, Ice Cube acknowledges the importance of the video recording in the King case, which was almost certainly the only reason that the officers were asked to explain, let alone held accountable for, their actions. On the other hand, the agents of the public transcript manipulated the video text to reinforce the image of African American males as dangerous and threatening. Their manipulation compromised the video's potential to bridge the gap between African American lived experience and "ideologies regarding equal opportunity and racial inequality" to which I referred at the beginning of this chapter (Rose 102). As George Cunningham, in "Body Politics: Race, Gender, and the Captive Body," claims, "the present with its linear and progressive possibilities" coexists with recursive moments that "*tell us who we are*" on the basis of past events (134, original emphasis). In the case of African American men, Cunningham argues, such recursive moments are almost always figured as violated bodies (134). It makes

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[68] Fiske notes that the "success with which race was silently recoded into place in the geographic dislocation of the trial was repeated as the defense's verbal discourse referred to every physical aspect of Rodney King's body except its race. They consistently described him in terms of his weight, height, strength, and masculinity. Time and again he was put into discourse as a 250-pound, six-foot-three-inch man with the physical strength to throw off police officers and withstand Taser guns, batons, and boots. He was repeatedly likened to a bear—a neat analogy in which racism could be simultaneously denied and exploited" (*Media Matters* 141).

sense, then, when Ice Cube suggests in the closing lines of the song that, like it or not, a gun may offer African American men a more reliable form of insurance against the very real risk that they will at some point be the victim of police brutality. However, in "Who Got the Camera," Ice Cube situates a Black man's first-hand account of a violent incident in place of the 'grand view' of genealogical history. In so doing, Ice Cube restores hermeneutic power to the Black male autobiographical subject in his song and provides him with a means of escape from the 'scene' of American racial violence (Baker 38).

VI

Tupac, the controversial rap artist who was shot and killed in Las Vegas in September, 1996, is another example of a rap artist who employed the genre, and also his body, to (re)produce effective histories. I dispute the view that Tupac's tattooed body, music, and death represented, at best, forms of regressive activism and, at worst, misguided acts of youthful rebellion.[69] Those who view Tupac and his work in that light err by falling into a trap that Barrett identifies as the assumption that "what these wayward citizens require to extricate themselves from their inevitably violent lives and circumstances is an epiphanic moment in which they acknowledge the distinction between an ill-chosen, unappealing self-performance and a more authentic self-performance deferred, often fatefully, by the other" (313). Proponents of such

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[69] This is not to suggest that Tupac's behavior did not at times warrant such criticism. He certainly had his fair share of legal problems. In 1992, he was involved in a fight in which a stray bullet killed a six year old boy. In 1993, he was charged, and later acquitted, of shooting at two off-duty police officers. And in 1995 he served 8 months in prison on Rikers Island after being convicted of two counts of sexual abuse. The incidents of sexual abuse involved a female fan and took place in a Manhattan hotel room in 1993 (F. Alexander 54). I think it important that, as critics, we try to prevent our engagements with his artistic projects from being tainted by our knowledge and feelings about his personal shortcomings, which often seemed to contradict his political vision.

views include Mumia Abu-Jamal, political prisoner and author of books and essays concerning the containment of Black men in the United States. Mumia characterizes Tupac's lifestyle and art as regressive forms of activism that signaled the movement "[f]rom revolutionary to thug . . . in one generation" (Abu-Jamal). Mumia views Tupac's death as a lost opportunity to "influence millions to go towards a revolutionary, as opposed to a materialistic, 'gangsta' direction" (Abu-Jamal). Similarly, the founder of Def Jam Records, Russell Simmons, attributes Tupac's death to misguided, youthful rebellion and claims that "[i]t was just that rebelliousness for the sake of it, that wild Rock n' Roll side of him that did this" (Williams 104). Darrell Dawsey concurs with Simmons when he suggests, "perhaps if the brother had chilled a bit more, he would have lived a bit longer" (38).

In contrast to the oversights of critics like Mumia, Simmons, and Dawsey, Greg Tate's understanding of Black genius might have been written with Tupac in mind. Indeed, Tate captures precisely the nature and effect of effective histories generally and Tupac's work as an effective historian specifically when he states that "[t]o live is to defy the logic that all we're supposed to do is stay black and die. To leave in your wake artistic legacies, documents, abstract bodies of work and knowledge, conceptual paradigms, aesthetic philosophies and methodologies, signature styles, mythic identities, is to increase confusion exponentially" (116-117). Unfortunately, like the readers of slave narratives to whom Baker refers, Tupac's critics too often fail to interpret his body, his work, and his death within the sacred and secular contexts in which he located them. As a result, they deny Tupac a hearing for the effective histories that he so diligently constructed. In fact, Tupac defied the

logic that is supposed to dominate the curriculum vitae[70] of a young, Black male by using music and tattoos to construct himself as a revolutionary figure, a liberator, and a martyr modeled on the image of a Black Jesus whom he saw as a saint for thugs and gangstas.[71] My aim here, then, is to relocate his body, his work, and his death vis-à-vis the sacred and secular contexts in which he located himself. I contend that Tupac's political concerns and the mediums through which he articulated them point to his sophisticated understanding of the relationships between racial and class oppression, political activism, Thug Life, and rap music.

Dan Quayle once declared with respect to Tupac's 1991 CD *2PACALYPSE NOW* "There is absolutely no reason for a record like this to be published . . . It has no place in our society" ("PAC'S Theme" *2PAC: STRICTLY 4 MY NIGGAZ).* Quayle's view of Tupac's work, and by logical extension of Tupac himself, represents just one of an extensive list of dismissals that convinced Tupac that for him and for those about whom he cared most, there was to be no room at any American inn. Tupac grew up living the life of an impoverished, urban nomad for whom his mother, former Black Panther Afeni Shakur, did her best to provide a religious foundation, an education, and an understanding of the everyday issues with which he, as an African American male, would have to contend. As Tupac puts it in "Souljah's

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[70] I employ the term curriculum vitae to refer to Tupac's body of work because its literal meaning, 'the course of a life,' and its use as a term to describe the resumes of academics, effectively capture the important ways in which Tupac interwove theory and personal experience to yield a legacy of praxis.

[71] Greg Tate, in "He is truly free who is free from the need to be free," argues that "Jesus must be the black man's patron saint because we do the martyr thing so prolifically" (116-117). For a discussion of other African American uses of the Black Christ figure see Eric Sundquist's *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*: Nat Turner 81-83; W.E.B. DuBois 592-623. Countee Cullen's lengthy poem "The Black Christ"(1929) is also an important example of how Black artists employ the Christ figure to speak to physical and psychic suffering of Black men.

Revenge," "Momma told me 'Don't let 'em fade me. . . . don't let 'em make ya crazy.' Game is what she gave me" (*2Pac Strictly 4 My Niggaz).* Given his background, Tupac's response at the age of ten to a question put to him by Reverend Herbert Daughtry, of The House of the Lord Church in Brooklyn, is not surprising. When Daughtry asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up Tupac replied, "I'm gonna be a revolutionary" (bandele 29). In keeping with his childhood ambition, Tupac described himself as a "hybrid cross of 'a black panther and a street hustler'" known and criticized for his glorification of 'Thug Life,' for his criminal record, for surviving acts of violence, for his tattoos, and of course for the form and content of his music (Mitchell-Bray 103). Daughtry seems to have been correct when he suggested at a memorial service for Tupac that his early aspirations towards revolution might explain the course of the rap artist's life (A. White 2). But to acquire a better understanding of the course of Tupac's life, critics must engage in the work of effective historians themselves. Such work entails re-reading texts that white America constructs and uses to perpetuate images of Black males as criminals and, in Tupac's case specifically, drawing on his music and his tattoos to conceptualize his personal goals and political agendas in relation to those images.

Marsha Mitchell-Bray has argued that Tupac's image as a 'thug' overshadowed what she terms his "secondary role[s] of intellectual, philosopher, [and] social activist" (103). She attributes the dominance of his thug image to a lack of respect among young, Black men for "intelligence, philosophical insight, social activism or formal training of which Shakur had an abundance" (103). Although I concur with Mitchell-Bray, I am also inclined to attribute the dominance of Tupac's

thug image to the broader context of American violence in which Baker claims Black men are 'scene' but rarely heard. That is, critics' responses to his thug image deflected attention away from the political and aesthetic value of his work. Accordingly, I disagree with those who criticize Tupac for failing to recognize and to respect the line between art and life, theory and practice. In fact, I think that those lines may have been clearer to Tupac than to anyone.[72] As Tupac accurately predicted, citing earlier revolutionaries such as Malcolm X, "I'm going to die in violence . . . All good niggers, all the niggers who change the world, die in violence. They don't die in regular ways. Motherfuckers come take their lives" (qtd. in Shaw 173). That clarity of vision notwithstanding, it seems apparent that Tupac considered the risks of crossing those lines to be worth taking given all that lies at stake if one respects them. As Holland suggests, "Black masculinity becomes meaningful, at least theoretically, when it is able to articulate for the culture a participatory system of mourning for us all" (388). In Tupac's case specifically, his "claim to the truth of [his] . . . *eventual* death" is supported by the fact that "statistically, being black and male means that he will die before he lives" (Holland 389, original emphasis). Thus I read Tupac's construction and conflation of his body, his life and his art, and by logical extension his death, as evidence of his praxis, or what Hortense Spillers defines as "a method for reading [living and dying] through their diverse mediations" (459).[73] As he once put it, "I'm not on no bullshit or anything, I'm gonna change the

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[72] Examples of such criticism include Powell's statement in *Rolling Stone* that Shakur's work "crosses the line from art and metaphor to real-life jeopardy" (51) and Ivan Solotaroff's comment in *Esquire* that "the line between art and life was erased in his mind" (86).

[73] In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Tupac relates how he came to realize the need for theory to jive with practice. Explaining his ambivalence to the political ideals of the Black Panther Party on the grounds that those ideals were at odds with the considerably less idyllic economic conditions of his

rules in this rap game. . . . I'ma shake up the whole Congress" (D. Smith T6). Tupac capitalized on the 'rap game' by exploiting its potential as a political arena in which it is possible, appropriate, and in Tupac's eyes essential, to disrupt the sanctity of the cultural, legal, and ideological paradigms which structure a narrative of delinquency for African American males.

Notwithstanding the risks, Tupac undertook the work of an effective historian by (re)producing narratives of events about which he hoped that his audiences would theorize by finding a "method for reading . . . through their diverse mediations" (Spillers 459). I do not dispute the fact that Tupac's death was a tragedy. However, I prefer not to read his death as a sign that his methodology failed. Rather, I think critical energy is more productively invested in reading and rereading the bodies of work that he produced so as to better understand how and why he went about addressing very real social problems in the ways that he did. To that end, I offer a reading which I hope will help reconcile what are mistakenly assumed to represent contradictions between Tupac's devotion to Thug Life and his frequent invocation of and improvisation on three of the most sacred texts and figures in Western culture—the bible, Moses, and Jesus Christ.

Wilson Jeremiah Moses, in *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (1993), claims that "old prophetic traditions no longer occupy a central position in Afro-American life" (15). Moses links the absence of such traditions to the erosion of folk traditions, illusions, and

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family life, he states, "[h]ere we was . . . kickin' all this shit about the revolution—and we starvin'. That didn't make no sense to me" (Gilmore 80). The days that he spent hungry and the nights that he spent in shelters for the homeless alerted Tupac to the need to "do whatever's gonna make you achieve your goal" (D. Smith T6).

values wrought by African Americans' inundation in post-industrial culture (15). The extent to which Tupac's work is underwritten by intertexts of African American religious and cultural traditions generally, and the messianic tradition specifically, suggests that their erosion is by no means complete. Indeed, as Moses himself asserts, one of the most important functions of the African American messianic tradition is to reconcile the contradictory experiences of "oppression by American social institutions, and immersion in the mainstream of American messianic culture. Ironically, it represents both a rejection of white America and a participation in one of its most sacred traditions." (14) Tupac's invocation of the bible, Moses, and Jesus Christ functions similarly in that his work draws its resonance from this sacred tradition as it critiques the effects of racist ideologies and practices.

Accordingly, I locate Tupac's work as an effective historian within the conceptual framework of typology that Theophus Smith, in *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (1994), defines as "the hermeneutic (interpretive) tradition that links biblical types or figures to postbiblical persons, places, and events" (55). On many occasions Tupac declared his allegiance to, and compared himself to, a "Black Jesus" whom he defined as a saint for thugs and gangstas (D. Smith T7).[74] In an interview with *Vibe*, for example, he claimed:

> I got shot five times and I got crucified in the media. And I walked through with the thorns on, and I had shit thrown on me, and I had the word thief at the top . . . . I'm not saying I'm Jesus, but I'm saying we go through that type of thing every day. We don't part the Red Sea, but we walk through the 'hood without getting shot. We don't turn water to wine, but we turn dope fiends and dope heads into productive citizens of society. We turn words into money—what greater gift can

[74] It is important to note that Tupac distinguished between thugs and gangstas, and killers and rapists (D. Smith T7).

> there be? . . . I believe God blesses those that hustle. (*Tupac Shakur* 98)

Tupac's alignment of himself with a Black Christ coheres with his claim that his work would land him "on the cross . . . crucified for keeping it real" (D. Smith T7). His comparison of the struggles of young, Black males to the feats and deeds of Moses also falls within a long history of African American identification with and bias toward the stories of the Old Testament.

Despite the frequency with which slave narratives include scathing indictments of the use of Christianity to justify the enslavement of African Americans, the Bible, especially the Book of Exodus, played a fundamental role in shaping how slaves and ex-slaves configured freedom in their lives, their culture, their literature and their music. As Smith argues, the significance of the Exodus figure tended to be the inverse of what it was for Puritans (64). In contrast to white, European Christians for whom America signified a promised land, African Americans saw and experienced America as another Egypt and associated themselves with the Hebrew slaves held in bondage under Pharaoh (T. Smith 64). Smith makes the point that the "slaves' inverse identification evinces an improvisational propensity . . . for variations and transformations of the available Euro-Christian materials and resources" (64). Accordingly, the exodus of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt provided African Americans with a "figural vision of . . . emancipation" that became "the paradigm for subsequent strategies and acts of political imagination" (T. Smith 63). According to Smith, "almost all blacks in America—past and present—have identified Egypt with America, Pharaoh and the Egyptians with white slaveholders

and subsequent racists, and blacks with the Israelite slaves" (71).[75] This Old Testament bias results in a tendency to draw Jesus—who was of course crucified after being found guilty of treason— into an Old Testament context in which he is conflated with Moses—who God chose to deliver Hebrews even though he had murdered an Egyptian, into a single "*ideal* of all that is high, and noble, and perfect, in man" (T. Smith 35).[76] One of the most interesting, but to date unrecognized, 'acts of political imagination' involving Exodus structures the relationship between Tupac's tattoos and his resistant praxis.

Tupac's comparison of himself and others who hustle to 'get over' to Jesus and Moses is also in keeping with an African American worldview that does not recognize a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. As Geneva Smitherman explains, in *Talkin and Testifyin* (1977), "while the secular style might be considered the primary domain of the street, and the sacred that of the church, no sharp

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[75] Smith makes particular note of the extent to which African Americans' religious and political productions draw on the book of Exodus. Indeed, he goes so far as to claim that "[i]n the Afro-American figural tradition it appears that all corporate liberation efforts can be configured, in the manner of ritual performances, as dramatic reenactments of Exodus, and their readers envisioned as approximate types of Moses" (67). Smith's claim is supported by both Levine, who states that "[t]he most persistent single image the slave songs contain is that of the chosen people" (33), and James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, who claim that "[i]t is not possible to estimate the sustaining influence that the story of the trials and tribulations of the Jews as related in the Old Testament exerted upon the Negro" (20). Eddie S. Glaude Jr. also notes the importance of Exodus to African Americans. Glaude writes, in *Exodus: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (2000): "although Exodus was a sacred text, it was not understood only in religious terms. The history of the story and its broad application across a disparate field of political engagements suggest that it was also interpreted in this-worldly and historical terms as a model for resistance and, perhaps, revolution" (3).

[76] Olguín discusses the frequency with which Chicano prisoners tattoo images of Jesus Christ on their bodies. Olguín describes how the icon "problematizes the juridical category of 'criminal' by linking convicts to Jesus Christ, the prototypical victim" (186). Further, Olguín notes how some convicts' tattoos of Christ bear a resemblance to their own faces thereby "elaborating the likeness of a never-before-seen-figure such as Jesus Christ on the very real and constantly visible convict's body" (187). Such conflation, to the "differently literate Chicano [prison] audience[s]" assumes the power of "a collective autobiography, a testimonio" (187).

dichotomy exists, but [rather] a kind of sacred-secular circular continuum" (93). Smitherman notes that "[t]he most striking example of this merging of sacred and secular styles is in the area of black music, where lyrics, musical scores, and singers themselves easily float in and out of both worlds" (93). She emphasizes that "the traditional black church's other-worldly orientation is balanced by coping strategies for *this* world. And, like the traditional African God, the Black American God is viewed not only as Someone Who dwells on High but One Who also inhabits this mundane earthly world" (92). That continuum makes Tupac's claim that "I've been blessed by God, and God walks with me" and his description of God as "a nigga that knows where I'm coming from" seem less at odds with thug life as he understood it (D. Smith T7).[77]

Without a doubt, the industries and activities in which Tupac participated situated him on a twentieth-century auction-block of sorts by exploiting both his Blackness and his maleness as a valuable commodity. The tattoos with which Tupac framed his body were one means by which he improvised on the Exodus figure and positioned himself on the continuum that stretches between a culture with which many people associate criminal behavior and all that is sacred in Western culture. I employ the term 'frame' to characterize the relationship between Tupac's tattoos, his body and the identity that he uses both to produce. This notion of a 'frame' is in keeping with Jean Comaroff's claim that the body itself functions as a "tangible frame of selfhood in individual and collective experience, providing a constellation of

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[77] In his song "Words of Wisdom" Shakur defines his use of the controversial term 'niggas': "When I say niggas it is not the nigga we are grown to fear. It is not the nigga we say as if it has no meaning. But to me it means Never Ignorant Getting Goals Accomplished, nigga" (*2Pacalypse Now* 1991).

physical signs with the potential for signifying the relations of persons to their contexts" (qtd. in Steiner 431). Tupac employed tattoos as signs to adorn his social body, to render its surface "the common frontier of society, the social self, and the psychological individual," and to function as a language through which "the drama of socialization is enacted" (qtd. in Steiner 431). He used them to signify on both past and present forms of containment as well as on bodily texts that bespeak suffering. He did so by richly inscribing his flesh with messages of resistance and calls for revolution. In this manner, he located himself within a tradition where human bodies have served as sites for the inscription of genealogical historical processes, while using his body to articulate an effective history (White & White 126).

Hortense Spillers, in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," makes a distinction between 'body' and 'flesh' which is useful in terms of understanding the relationships between containment, abuse, and resistance to which Tupac's tattoos speak. According to Spillers, the distinction between 'body' and 'flesh' is

> the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the "body" there is the "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, of the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies—some of them female—out of West African communities in concert with the African "middleman," we regard this human social irreparability as high crimes against the *flesh*, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. If we think of the "flesh" as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hold, fallen, or "escaped" overboard. (457, original emphasis)

What Spillers terms the 'flesh' is what Shane White and Graham White, in *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (1998), discuss as the surface of Black bodies on which "[i]n freedom, as in slavery . . . the

struggle between black and white was often cruelly etched, and on which the record of that struggle may be read" (White & White 126). White and White cite as an example the story of an ex-slave named Sandie who mutilated his body and threatened to commit suicide in front of white witnesses who were attempting to return him to bondage after documents attesting to his freedom had been burned in a fire. They relate how, many years later, Sandie, by then a successful farmer who was renowned for his physical strength, still bore the signs of his struggle for freedom on his body, or, in Spillers' terms, on his flesh (125-126). White and White explain:

> Within a social context that denied blacks any kind of discursive access to the public world, we can sense Sandie's determination to control his own fate, to write his own script, as it were. . . . Given Sandie's inability to document his freedom by producing the lost emancipation papers, he was compelled, by the limitations faced by a free black in a slave society, to inscribe that freedom on his body, and in the most dramatic of ways. (126)[78]

Although the inscriptions on Sandie's flesh were not audible per se, in important respects their longevity countered the erasure characteristic of genealogical histories. However, as Foucault contends: "[t]he body manifests the stigmata of past experience and also gives rise to desires, failings, and errors. These elements may join in a body where they achieve a sudden expression, but as often, their encounter is an

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[78] Olguín's explanation of the nature and function of tattoos on Chicano prisoners supports Spillers' and White and White's points about inscribed bodies. Olguín writes with respect to the symbolic use-value of tattoos in prison: "they represent a form of capital, cultural capital, that all can share—even those without tattoos. . . . *Tatuajes*, rather than simply modeling the exotic difference of the 'other,' instead expose the dialectical forces at work in the articulation of difference even as these texts produce a counterhegemonic Ideology of difference. The Convict Body in general, and especially the brown, *Tatuaje*-marked *text* of the Chicano Convict Body, make manifest their challenge to the underlying subtexts: that is, the peonage and proletarianization of the racially marked Chicano people after 1848, and the concurrent commodification of the 'convicted' brown body (not to mention the convicted 'Black male suspect') at the twilight of chattel slavery. Thus, the transgression articulated through vernacular writing rituals such as *Tatuteando* (rather than through more easily coopted literary forms of writing) becomes the ontological basis of the new (or old) counterhegemonic Chicano Subject" (175).

engagement in which they efface each other, where the body becomes the pretext of their insurmountable conflict" ("Nietzsche" 148). Tupac's intricately related tattoos and the varying degrees and types of attention afforded them situated his body as the site of a conflict of the sort that Foucault identifies.[79]

The largest and I think most important of Tupac's tattoos were the THUG LIFE which stretched across his abdomen and the EXODUS 1811 which covered most of his upper back. Although Tupac's THUG LIFE tattoo was photographed frequently and was mentioned in disparaging ways by almost everyone who has written about him, the EXODUS 1811 tattoo was rarely photographed and almost never discussed. On the one hand, it would seem obvious to attribute the lack of attention to the EXODUS 1811 tattoo to the fact that it was so rarely photographed. On the other hand, such an explanation does not explain why photographers ignored it in the first place, given its size and the fact that it was situated as prominently on Shakur's body as the THUG LIFE tattoo. As Robert Rawdon Wilson asserts in "Tattoos: Play and Interpretation," "[b]ack tattoos are always especially striking. The area of skin to be covered is larger than any other part of the body and permits more detailed, integrated images. It is also a part of the body that the tattooed person cannot normally see. Hence back tattoos are literally designed for others to see. They are often flagrant . . . but they are also the tattoos most likely to make aesthetic claims"

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[79] Wilson, argues in "Graffiti Become Terror: The Idea of Resistance," argues that a "tattoo carries many messages—affiliation, disaffiliation, exfiliation, anger, alienation, empathy, and (like the well-known knuckle tattoos) both hate and love—all of which can be 'read,' or semiotically decoded, as opposition to a given culture, regime, or discipline. A willful energetic exercise in self-symbolization, a tattoo may suggest a sociopathic personality, or merely a carnivalesque one. In all events, it identifies a person who claims a certain identity, usually in the face of social convention, and who exists in opposition to convention" (276). Although I do not agree with Wilson's categorical assertion that all tattoos fly in the face of social convention, the complex array of Tupac's tattoos lend themselves to readings that decode thickly textured narratives of opposition to racial and class oppression.

(75). I find this oversight even more mystifying given what I believe to be the rich nuances of its relationship to the THUG LIFE tattoo. By discussing Tupac's THUG LIFE tattoo in isolation from both EXODUS 1811 and his music, critics confined Tupac to the 'scene' of American violence and obscured, indeed erased, the evidence of his efforts to define, to advocate, and to engage in his particular brand of praxis, his method of reading and conceptualizing the ways that Black men live. And the ways that they die. His praxis involved using his tattoos to bring into closer proximity rap music, the hustling ethic which for him was inextricably linked to THUG LIFE, his sense of his Christ-like role as one both chosen and willing to bring about change during his short time on earth, and God's revolutionary approaches to social and political transformation. What seem at first glance to be unrelated sacred and secular referents for each tattoo, function together to free Tupac's body from the texts of genealogical history by articulating resistance to the notion that knowledge is anything more than perspective (Foucault "Nietzsche" 153, 156). Both the tattoos themselves and critics' responses to them (or lack thereof) make sense in light of Fiske's claim that visual texts (such as tattoos) and verbal responses to such texts (such as those of both fans and opponents to rap) share a complex relationship (*Media Matters* 133). That relationship is characterized by movement "up and down the social and discursive hierarchies, as they oppose or endorse each other's way of knowing" (Fiske *Media Matters* 133).

Tupac's tattoos denote one interstitial locus at stake in what Foucault refers to as "the hazardous play of dominations" (Foucault "Nietzsche" 148). The verse Exodus 18:11 is part of an elegy to God for effecting the liberation of the Israelites

from slavery. The verse relates how God liberated the Children of Israel by dealing with the Egyptians "in just that matter in which [the Egyptians] were presumptuous against [the Children of Israel]." The Black Panthers' slogan with which Tupac obviously would have been quite familiar, "defend our communities by any means necessary," might just as easily have been God's motto as he liberated the Hebrew slaves (Smitherman 83). Like God's eye-for-an-eye approach to effecting change, Tupac, in addition to turning his words into money, used his flesh and his rhymes to call attention to the ways in which whites have been presumptuous against Blacks, to reassign blame accordingly, and to call for people to rethink their assumptions about the issues with which he was concerned but did not create. He did so by constructing an image of himself as a revolutionary, a martyr, and a saint—that is, a Black Jesus who was willing to suffer so that others might lead better lives.

Tupac's critics, however, mistakenly and reductively interpret frequent references to THUG LIFE as his attempt to advocate criminal lifestyles as opposed to a hustling ethic. Michael Datcher, for example, suggests that

> [w]hen [Tupac] scrawled THUG LIFE across his torso, he was writing a painful treatise on the limited possibilities of his life. A dissertation that he researched by imitating bullshit niggas masquerading as men who learned their ideas from bullshit niggas before them. THUG LIFE became his mantra. He repeated it each time he made a choice to ignore the brilliance that threatened to make him feel good about himself. (35)

In one sense, Datcher was correct. Tupac, a frequent user of acronyms, claimed that THUG LIFE stood for "the hate you give little infants fucks everybody."[80] He

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[80] Holland offers the following reading of Tupac's THUG LIFE tattoo: "THUG LIFE represents a coming back from the dead, as black youth recognize not just their relative invisibility in the culture at large, but also perceive an active hatred of them that is systematic (this is what the universal and

certainly had first-hand knowledge of the relationship between racial hatred and the social and economic implications for African American people. He queried the causes and consequences of being both poor and Black in the United States in a posthumously released track entitled, "I wonder if heaven got a ghetto" (2Pac RU Still down [remember me] 1997). However, Tupac also envisioned and articulated a definition of THUG LIFE that exceeded the limits that critics imposed on its meaning. As Tupac asserts in "Pac's Theme," "I was raised in this society so there's no way you can expect me to be a perfect person cuz Ima do what Ima do" (*Strictly 4 My Niggaz)*. Tupac's point is that, if there is no place in Dan Quayle's version of 'our' society where Tupac and other young, Black, male subjects can be heard and not 'scene,' then alternative spaces must be forged. Ironically, Tupac's success in the industry meant that the much maligned space in which he functioned enabled him to afford all of the material signs of Dan Quayle-style respectability. Rightly or wrongly, therefore, Tupac suggests that young, Black, males living in the United States today often have little choice but to embrace the hustling ethic, to 'get over' by whatever means necessary, and sometimes in the manner in which others have been presumptuous against them. As one young fan of Snoop Dogg put it, "you gotta take what's yours. If you want to get out of the projects, which always there are people trying to keep you in, he's saying you gotta take that chance" (qtd. in Quinn 76). That is, this fan implies, "violence might be one way out of the ghetto, since it is a form of violence which keeps you there" (Quinn 76).

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capital 'U' implies). These words etched in the flesh take on a life of their own and resonate even after Shakur's death—Still/Here" (392).

By invoking EXODUS 1811, Tupac reminds us of the violence to which the angry, merciless God of the Old Testament resorted to free the Children of Israel. He then draws on this sacred precedent to back (literally) his call for Black men to engage in an equally persistent uprising against the dominant society. He justifies the need for such violence in his song "Words of Wisdom:"

> Killing us one by one. In one way or another America will find a way to eliminate the problem. One by One. The problem is the troubles in the black youth of the ghettos. And one by one We are being wiped off the face of this earth at an extremely alarming rate. And even more alarming is the fact that we are not fighting back. . . . Niggas what are we going to do? Walk blind into a line or fight, fight and die if we must like niggas. (2*Pacalypse Now* 1991)

In "Soulja's Story" Tupac echoes Ice Cube's point in "Who Got the Camera" when he talks about the conundrum in which Black males find themselves all too often: "Just cause I'm a young black male, cops sweat me as if my destiny is makin' crack sells . . . keep my shit cocked, cause tha cop's got a glock too. What tha fuck would you do? Drop them or let 'em drop you?" (2*Pacalypse Now* 1991) On at least one occasion, as Tupac recalls in "Soulja Story," he "chose droppin' tha cop," a choice that in 1993 saw him arrested in Atlanta for allegedly shooting two off-duty cops who were hassling a black motorist. The charges were later dropped (Williams 104). Tupac's lyrics also indicate that he advocated the use of discursive weapons to lay claim to space within the public transcript, to wage war, to effect history and to create an effective history. That is, he was aware of and capitalized on rap music's usefulness as a way to circulate knowledge about and mobilize resistance to 'scenes' of American violence in which African American males are implicated as victims.

In "Young Black Male," for instance, Tupac raps, "I try to effect by kicking the facts . . . cuz I ain't equipped to stop how I look" (2*Pacalypse Now* 1991). The consequence of 'kicking the facts,' he explains in "Violent," is that "[critics] claim that I'm violent just cuz I refuse to be silent. These hypocrites are havin' fears cuz I'm not buying it, . . . I'm never ignorant, getten goals accomplished . . . This time tha truth is getten told . . . I told'em fight back, attack on society. If this is violence then violent's what I gotta be" (2*Pacalypse Now* 1991). Capturing the severity of the threat that critics (whom he likens to police officers in "Souljah's Revenge") pose to hearings for Black men generally, and him specifically, Tupac calls attention to the hypocrisy that underscores such efforts to silence him: "You wanna censor something Motherfucka censor this! My words are weapons and I'm stepin to the sirens Wakin up the masses but you claim I'm violent" ("Violent" 2*Pacalypse Now* 1991). In this regard, Tupac echoes other cultural critics when he contends, "[i]f you investigate you'll find out where it's coming from. Look through our history, America's the violent one" ("Violent" 2*Pacalypse Now* 1991). Fighting in the form of writing rhymes, then, is a concept that is central to Tupac's thinking. Both his tattoos and his music speak to his awareness of the relationship between the policing of African American discourse and art and the policing of Black bodies. Tupac's emphasis on and use of his flesh to (re)produce effective histories, his subversion of hegemonic discourses in his lyrics, and his invocation of the past to make sense of the present, make him an ally in the struggles of other effective historians.

As my readings of his EXODUS 1811 and THUG LIFE tattoos demonstrate, Tupac's work is informed by an African American messianic tradition that "has

always been related to motifs of vengeance and retribution" (Moses 226).[81] His work also reflects a tension in the messianic tradition between the "apocalyptic version of the [messianic] myth, derived from the Book of Revelation" and the "sacrificial version, derived from the Sermon on the Mount" (Moses 229). Tupac's first-hand knowledge of the violent consequences that hustlers too frequently suffer, and his accurate foresight of his own death, led him to prepare a body of work resembling apocalyptic texts warning that the time for change, resurrection, and redemption is near.[82] For example, Tupac's prophecies of his untimely and violent demise, in both his music and his interviews, suggest that he, like Christ, was resigned to the fact that his body and blood would be the inevitable cost of what he believed to be his mission on earth. That mission, as he put it in "Words of Wisdom," was to be a spokesperson for the masses and the lower classes (2*Pacalypse Now* 1991). On September 7, 1996 Tupac was marked by stigmata that, for the second time in his short life, took the

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[81] Theophus Smith emphasizes the long history of the messianic tradition within which I locate Tupac's work. Smith writes: "The Transformation of encounters with ethnic violence into ritual occasions for identification with Christ and his suffering or passion extend from the period of slave religion in the United States to the King movement of the 1960's" (184). Tupac's incorporation of messianic myths in his work speaks to the tradition's longevity. His work also reflects the Black Jeremiad tradition. Moses uses the term "jeremiad" to describe the "constant warnings issued by blacks to whites, concerning the judgment that was to come for the sin of slavery" (30). An important part of this tradition grew out of Black Abolitionist David Walker's *Appeal*, published in 1829 in response to Jefferson's racial theories. A significant component of Walker's *Appeal* was its second Article entitled "Our Wretchedness in Consequence of Ignorance." In Article II, Walker criticized Blacks whose behavior situated them "in league with slave holders" and was indicative of their failure "to know and act in accordance with their best interests" (41). Walker attributed such complicity to Blacks' belief in their inferiority. There were times when Tupac gestured toward the issue of Black men's complicity in their own oppression. His invocation of the East-West rivalry on the cover of *Makaveli: the donkilluminati: The 7 Day Theory* invoked the nihilistic behavior that occurs within the rap community. It is unfortunate that he did not live long enough to further explore the tensions that surrounded the art form that he excelled at and believed in as a medium of political expression, and the industry which in many ways encouraged disunity, rather than solidarity, among young Black men as it Tupac seemed to have begun to shift his focus in that direction as well.

[82] Generally speaking, apocalyptic texts are those which may include a "survey of history often leading to an eschatological crisis in which the cosmic powers of evil are destroyed, the cosmos is restored,

form of multiple bullet wounds. Like Christ, Tupac died from those wounds on a Friday—September 13, 1996. As with other celebrities who have died, Tupac's passing fostered numerous theories based on numerological, biographical, and artistic evidence that he faked his death to add substance to his claims that he would be crucified for his stands. Proponents of such theories expect that, at some future moment, Tupac will return to bear witness to the redemption of his followers. Clues involving the number seven in both his work and his life have led some hopeful fans to speculate that Tupac's second coming will occur in 2003—seven years after his death—in time to fund a candidate of his choosing for the next presidential election. As well, Tupac's post-humously released *Makaveli: the 7 day theory*, added a good deal of fuel to the fires of second-coming theories. For example, the lyrics of many of the songs on this CD have been read in a manner akin to the Book of Revelations; the executive producer of the CD is listed only as 'Simon,' the by-then-renamed apostle Peter, who both helped Christ to carry his cross and was the first witness to Christ's resurrection (Luke 24:34, 1Cor 15:5); and, most interestingly, its cover depicts Tupac nailed to a cross. That cross is inscribed with the names of urban centers from both eastern and western parts of the United States. The names of the cities allude directly to the East coast/West coast rivalry between rappers on which some have blamed Tupac's death. But the issues with which he was concerned and for which he was willing to die, suggest that he intended the album cover and music to reference problems far more complex than a rivalry that took shape around geographic loci and loyalties. That is, the classism, racism, and sexism that produced the environments

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and Israel (or 'the righteous') is redeemed" (Metzger, Coogan 34). As well, apocalyptic texts may also reveal things that were previously unknown or hidden (Metzger, Coogan 34).

within which Tupac sought to effect awareness, resistance, and change, are not the product of a world divided by geographic differences. Rather, they are the product of a nation that over one hundred and thirty years after emancipation, continues actively to seek ways to contain African American people.

Tupac's construction of himself in the image of a Black Christ was geared towards goals that exceeded the relative importance of a single individual. His work suggests that he wanted his biblical imagery and his representation of himself as a Black Jesus to be interpreted and employed in ways that would positively affect Black communities sooner rather than later. My position is informed by biblical scholarship which suggests that Christ's preaching contains no evidence that he foresaw a resurrection for himself but rather that he envisioned a collective resurrection of believers willing to forego temptation in order that they might be delivered from evil after his death (Metzger & Coogan 647). Likewise, Tupac took advantage of the cross-like-pedestal on which he foresaw his fame and fortune ultimately situating him to call in his unique way for a resurrection of both community and nation.

VII

In this chapter I have structured a context in which to better understand the controversial form, content, and culture that has come to be associated in general with rap music, rap artists, and the industry which conjoins them, and more specifically with Tupac Shakur's work. My efforts would be incomplete, however, were I to conclude without briefly speaking to the ways in which rap and its various agents become complicit in the sorts of containment that they have a stake in undermining. I

am concerned with what are often taken to be, and sometimes are, contradictions between the political agendas with which many rap artists purport to be concerned and the products into which such agendas are shaped prior to their release into the cyclonic configurations of market, culture, and Ideology. I conclude, therefore, not by attempting to explain away or condemn the profanity, misogyny, and violence on which anti-rap critics focus solely and which rap fans too often, too easily, and too uncritically choose to ignore. Rather, I turn to Judith Butler who offers two ways to think about rap lyrics that are easily dismissed as randomly chosen examples of pathological behavior that yield nothing more than false senses of empowerment derived from the degradation, abuse, and hatred of others.

Judith Butler, in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), cites rap music as an example of a venue within which artists appropriate and recirculate familiar languages of social injury only to be held responsible for the import of those languages (96). Butler links the irony of this process to a hegemonic desire to hide the figure of power's complicity in the construction and dissemination of such languages behind masks that depict integrity and concern (78). Such masking enables the powerful to define, to identify, and to punish forms of speech which are produced, paradoxically, by figures of power themselves who demarcate "the line between the domains of the speakable and the unspeakable"—that which is heard and that which is 'scene'—and who retain the power to make and to sustain those lines. Thus, languages of injury—misogyny, racism, homophobia—are named by a figure of power that deploys its own contrived image to denounce the rights of disempowered figures to exercise similar powers through language and its material effects.

Butler calls our attention to two of the ways that rap artists respond to and use languages of social injury. On the one hand, they struggle to reclaim the right to define the contexts within which languages of social injury mean and matter so that they might be deployed to further an agenda of agency and liberation (77). Rap artists such as Tupac and Ice Cube, for instance, have been attentive to the need to expose the origins of the practices to which injurious languages give legitimacy.[83] A good deal of their work, though certainly not all of it, reflects their efforts to reenact injurious words in revisionary aesthetic contexts. As Butler explains, such artists

> both *use* the word and *mention* it, that is, make use of it to produce certain effects but also at the same time make reference to that very use, calling attention to it as a citation, situating that use within a citational legacy, making that use into an explicit discursive item to be reflected on rather than a taken for granted operation of ordinary language. Or, it may be that an aesthetic reenactment *uses* that word, but also *displays* it, points to it, outlines it as the arbitrary material instance of language that is exploited to produce certain kinds of effects. (99, original emphasis)

Although there is no consensus as to whether it is truly possible to empty an injurious word of its material significance, because there are those who believe it to be possible, their work that attempts such a feat ought to be considered at least worthy of critical consideration. At the very least, as Butler puts it, such efforts mean that "we can begin to ask: how does a word become the site for the power to injure" (100). This is not to say that the broader cultural contexts in which the artist and his work circulate do not at times obviate the political significance or impressiveness of such efforts. On the other hand, many rap artists use injurious languages solely for the purposes of spectacle and profit in ways that do not "overcome their degrading

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[83] As I discussed earlier, Tupac was particularly careful to define the ways in which he was using words and phrases such as 'nigga" and "thug life."

meaning," but rather "recirculate their degradation" (100). With respect to rap of this sort, I concur with Rose who emphasizes it must be "rightfully lambasted for [its] sexism" and homophobia without labeling all rap music as thoroughly sexist or homophobic (15). Although it is sometimes difficult to identify the redeeming qualities of rap amidst those that perpetuate the criminalization of Black men's images and reinforce languages of social injury that affect other disenfranchised groups, above all I think it critically important to remain open to the idea that the genre can and often does function as a site in which Black men find ways to voice their resistance to containment, and to heed those voices even when their messages are obscured by troubling contradictions.

As we saw in Chapter One, and as we shall see again in Chapters Three and Four, white America has made an art of manipulating the images of Black men to suit its social, political, and economic agendas that share in common the goal of containing African American males. Rap artists, like prisoners, athletes, and working-class Black men, have responded in myriad ways by forging creative avenues of resistance by which they attempt, sometimes successfully, sometimes not, to reclaim some of the power and agency that are up for grabs in the zones of struggle between dominant and subordinate (Scott 14). The untimely deaths, criminal records, and violent-sounding products of more than a few rap artists suggest that the "chasm between black urban lived experience and dominant, 'legitimate' . . . ideologies regarding equal opportunity and racial inequality" has only begun to be bridged (Rose 102). But bridged it must become, for various forms of the prison, and the

battlegrounds which encompass them, abound on which Black men labor to expose and to resist in myriad ways the forms of containment within which they function.

Chapter Three

Black Balled: Basketball and Representations of the Black Male Athlete

I

Clyde Taylor, in his essay "The Game," contends that Black men in the United States are players, though not by choice, in a high-stakes game in which the 'prize' at stake "is the soul, spirit, and creative energy of Black men themselves" (167).[84] This game, according to Taylor, is ironic because the 'souls of Black men' are what is at stake but "the contest is carried out on the body of the Black male"(167). Furthermore, 'the game' is oblique because "many Black men, players all, don't even know the object of the contest, have no clue of the rules, the stakes, or even that they are both in the game and the quarry" (167). Taylor's thesis that there exists a game within which African American men become forced participants provides the framework within which I consider the ways that historical representations of Black men inform the construction of professional basketball as a racialized site of containment and contemporary representations of Black male

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[84] Although I invoke Taylor's definition of 'The Game' to introduce this chapter, the notion of 'the Game' did not originate with Taylor. Todd Boyd addresses the broad usage of the term in the preface to his co-edited volume of essays *Basketball Jones: America Above the Rim* (2000). He writes: "The Game. This is the metaphor used by so many Brothas that it ain't even funny. Michael Jordan talks about raising his game to a higher level; Ice Cube incites us to be true to the game; and down in the dirty south, Silk the Shocker encourages us to charge it to the game. The metaphor has a historical precedent as well. Back in the day, Iceberg Slim pontificated on the game, and Richard Pryor's memorable character from *The Mack* (1973) told us the game was strong. In the present, Snoop Dogg tells us that the game is to be sold, not to be told" (ix). Although there is no single definition of 'the game,' Boyd offers the following as a starting point: "Life in America, for far too many Brothas has been about playing a concerted game of chance, with the odds definitely stacked against them. These Brothas have attempted to turn a game of chance into a game of skill, and because of this, life itself becomes an ongoing game. This influence pervades Black culture, and because sports has been one of the arenas where there has been a consistent Black presence, even dominance, the notion of the game is that much more a part of everyday life. The three most commonly referenced games in contemporary Black popular culture are basketball, the rap game, and the dope game" (ix).

athletes.[85] I locate contemporary representations of Black male athletes within the constantly turning cycles of cultural lore. Specifically, I argue that historical images of Black men as hypersexual criminals inform contemporary responses to, and representations of, Black male basketball players. I argue that the methods by which white America manages its fearful and voyeuristic responses to Black male athletes are representative of how it manages its relationships to Black men generally. I suggest that it is possible to better understand the cycle of white lore within which historical images of Black men circulate by applying a telescoped gaze to basketball and representations of professional Black basketball players.

I begin by briefly contextualizing historical images of Black men in relation to two of the methods by which white Americans have traditionally managed their fear of, and fascination with, Black men, namely Blackface minstrelsy and lynching. I proceed to a general discussion of basketball and the ways in which the contributions of Black athletes to the game led to the structuring of the sport as a racialized site within the United States. Next, I discuss the ways in which the historical images and disciplinary methods that I discuss early in the chapter inform white America's ways of seeing, representing, and disciplining Black men today. Specifically, I link the dynamic of fear and desire enacted in literal ways in minstrel performances and lynching rituals to the more subtle ways that the same dynamic informs contemporary responses to, and representations of, Black male athletes. As cases in point, I discuss the infamous coach-choking incident involving Latrell Sprewell, two of the Nike

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[85] I am concerned specifically with the images of Black men that informed minstrel performances by both Blacks and whites during the nineteenth century, and with those that were mobilized to justify lynchings and enacted during lynching rituals throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

television commercials featuring the 'Fun Police,' and the images and representations of the recently retired players, Dennis Rodman and Michael Jordan. I argue that Sprewell's anger and what was arguably resistance towards his coach's derogatory coaching methods, and Rodman's blatant disregard for the rules and regulations governing the behavior of Black males generally and Black male athletes specifically make visible, as they push, the boundaries within which white America is most comfortable identifying Black males. In contrast, I suggest that Jordan's aestheticized body and gentrified image offer no categorical challenges to social control and discipline. In sum, this chapter links the game of basketball to the broader 'games' in which Black men are implicated and in which so many are masters when it comes to finding ways to incorporate the pleasure of undisciplined sites into the closely curtailed and regimented structure of the prison-writ-large.

II

In this section, I employ W.T. Lhamon's concept of the lore cycle to trace patterns of continuity and change as they pertain to white representations of Black men. Specifically, I use the lore cycle as a paradigm in which I locate and link the minstrel man, in particular his association with the black penis, the ritual of castration in lynchings of Black men, and, as we will see in the next section of this chapter, what amounts to the 'social castration' of Black male athletes. To establish the relationship between these three related responses to Black men, I begin by explaining the aptness of the lore cycle as a paradigm for my subsequent explorations in this chapter. Lhamon, in *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (1998), uses the notion of a lore cycle to conceptualize complex systems and

processes of representation that function in culture, as do stereotypes in discourse (70). Cultural lore creates, expresses, and is structured by the values, beliefs, and ideologies of a group. It functions as a system of documentation through representations that are saturated with history and meaning, widely recognized and understood, and highly adaptable to changes in current belief systems and contexts. In short, cultural lore shapes the texts and contexts, the stories and the images, through which people understand, construct, reconstruct, negotiate, change, and represent themselves and others in relation to the cultural contexts in which they live.

These functions work collectively to shape a lore cycle. On the one hand, lore seems to produce tautologies in which beliefs prompt, license, and modulate actions, which in turn appear to authenticate the group's beliefs. In fact, what appears to be a pattern of repetition and sameness is actually a process of recursion and difference. That is, lore cycles are more cyclical than circular, more dynamic than static, and more inclusive than exclusive in the most dangerous senses of the words. As such, lore is both determinative because it culls and enforces the beliefs upon which a group predicates its actions, and adaptive because of the ease with which it mutates across time and space in accordance with changes in social, cultural, political, and economic environments (Lhamon 69-73). The criminalization that is so central to the construction of the prison-writ-large marks a racialized cycle of white lore that bears the traces of a history of cultural exploitation and unspeakable acts of violence. It is through such acts that whites have managed their fear of and desire for Black men, and in which I will locate representations of Black male athletes.

The particular aspect of Blackface minstrelsy in which I am interested here is the relationship between minstrelsy and masculinity generally, and the figure of the minstrel man and the black penis specifically. Eric Lott, in *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1995), reads the adoption of the black mask by white men as a method by which the latter negotiated the tension between their fears of "degraded and threatening" Black men and their desire to control those fears through the corporeal mastery of the figures themselves (25). This tension was, in part, an outgrowth of one of the primary contradictions that underlay a capitalist (slave) economy in which humans represented both capital and labor, for within such a system human labor must both reproduce itself and surplus value (Lott 117). Within such an economy, to fully recognize the body of the slave as human, and the body of the male slave as a man, was to "recognize the exploitative organization of labor that structures their economies" and the latent masculine authority of the laborers themselves (Lott 117-118). The lore through which whites mediated these contradictions reduced the body to sexuality, dismembered it through medical discourse, and dehumanized it through discourses of racial biology (Lott 118). The Blackface minstrel show, as a method of "corporeal containment," functioned as a site of representation in which white men performed their obsession with the parts, functions, and attributes to which they reduced black male bodies. Such performances were inscribed with references to and plays on miscegenation, homosexuality, and transvestism, to the extent that such shows came to be defined by "white men's investment in the black penis" (Lott 121). Indeed, Lott goes so far as to argue that "in a real sense the minstrel man *was* the penis" because of the recursive manner in

which the penis appeared in different contexts. The lore of the black penis was played out in minstrel performances in ways that produced a titillating tension arising from, on the one hand, the pleasure that the predominantly white male audiences "derived from their investment in 'blackness,'" and the every-present threat of castration that was "obsessively reversed in white lynching rituals (Lott 9). The dynamic of pleasure and fear structured the minstrel show as a site of contradiction that invoked, as it derided, the power of 'blackness' "in an effort of cultural control, through the very convention that produced its power—the greasepaint and burnt cork of blackface" (Lott 25-26).

The lore of the black penis also informed what Robyn Wiegman, in *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (1995), refers to as the "anatomy of lynching." Wiegman locates lynching within a sexual economy in which the practice functioned as a disciplinary practice of racial control (82). The specificities of the lynching rituals, most notably the severing of Black men's penises, represented brutal and ritualized literal responses to what Wiegman terms the theoretical effect of emancipation, which was to define Black men as 'socially the same' as white males (87). Based on this claim, Wiegman unapologetically advocates and performs a rereading of Black men's relationships to patriarchal privilege on the grounds that "all men do not share equally in masculine rights and privileges," and thereby challenges the notion that power relationships are "uniformly based on sexual difference (men as oppressor, women as oppressed)" (83). Wiegman emphasizes the particularly ironic motives for and implications of the ritual severing of the penis when she claims that severing a Black man's penis signified the mob's denial of both the physical sign of

the masculine and the symbolic marker of patriarchal authority (83). The irony of the ritual lies in the fact that lynch mobs frequently justified lynchings by constructing their Black male victims as threatening embodiments of violent masculinity of which their fear was so great that they deemed it necessary to align even dead, Black, male bodies with those of women, whom the theoretical effect of emancipation left untouched. As W. Fitzhugh Brundage argues in his introduction to *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (1997),

> [t]he dramatic spectacle of each lynching taught all southerners, male and female, black and white, precisely where in the social hierarchy they stood. For black men and women, lynchings graphically demonstrated their vulnerability and debasement; for white women, the violence reaffirmed their dependence upon white men; and for white men, lynching was a ritual that manifested their intention to occupy the loftiest position in the racial and gender hierarchy of the South. (11)

The construction of taboo lines, especially those which forbade sexual relationships between Black men and white women, direct us to the relationship between the lore of the black penis in minstrel performances and its reappearance in lynching rituals, practices that both served to delineate Blacks' and whites' places in the various hierarchies of the United States.

Wiegman's discussion of the spectacular methods by which lynching rituals were carried out explains how lynching came to represent and to be employed as a means to a desired end. As she explains, "[o]perating according to a logic of borders—racial, sexual, national, psychological, and biological as well as gendered—lynching figures its victims as the culturally abject—monstrosities of excess whose limp and hanging bodies function as the specular assurance that the racial threat has not simply been averted, but rendered incapable of return" (81). Wiegman cites a

1907 speech delivered by South Carolina Senator Ben Tillman as evidence of the vehement conviction with which whites rationalized lynching as the most appropriate way of dealing with Black men who had been accused of committing sex crimes against white women: "So far as I am concerned he has put himself outside the pale of the law, human and divine. . . . Civilization peels off us . . . and we revert to the . . . impulses . . . to 'kill! kill! kill!'" (96). Wiegman notes that Tillman follows his assertion by both denying that he hates Blacks and expressing his nostalgia for "the negroes of the old slave days . . . the negroes who knew they were inferior and who never presumed to assert equality" (97). As Wiegman puts it, "while the slavery period often envisioned the Uncle Tom figure as the signification of the 'positive good' of a system that protected and cared for its black 'children,' once emancipated, these children became virile men who wanted for themselves the ultimate symbol of white civilization: the white woman" (96). The literal violence of the lynching rituals thereby extended the violence wrought by the cultural constructions and representations of Black males as hypersexualized rapists that emerged in response to the officially sanctioned, theoretical inclusion of Black males within the newly-integrated category of masculinity.[86]

James Baldwin's disturbing short story "Going to Meet the Man" (1965) which addresses precisely the sorts of masculine contests to which Wiegman calls attention and demonstrates how castration rituals in lynchings marked a violent turn in the white lore cycle. In "Going to Meet the Man" Baldwin tells the story of Jesse, a

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[86] Wiegman's compelling analysis of the relationships between lynching rituals and perceived threats to white, masculine status supports Lindon Barrett's definition of race as "a series of prohibitions on social desire and sexual practice, prohibitions stabilizing and ensuring the transmission of identifying

white sheriff who finds it difficult to adapt to the ways in which social and political changes require him to alter his methods of exercising authority over the Black people who reside in his jurisdiction. The story begins with a scene in which Jesse is unable to have sex with his wife because of an episode of impotence. Jesse's unwillingness to ask his wife to "do just a little thing for him, just to help him out . . . the way he could ask a nigger girl to do it" leads him to revive his impaired virility by reimagining, as he lies with "one hand between his legs," the day's events in relation to a day long ago when he accompanied his parents to a lynching (229).

On that earlier day, Jesse witnesses a Black man being burned alive and dismembered for allegedly knocking down an elderly, white woman. As Baldwin writes:

> [The Black male victim] wanted death to come quickly. They wanted to make death wait: and it was they who held death, now, on a leash which they lengthened little by little. *What did he do?* Jesse wondered. *What did the man do? What did he do?*—but he could not ask his father. He was seated on his father's shoulders, but his father was far away. There were two older men, friends of his father's, raising and lowering the chain; everyone, indiscriminately, seemed to be responsible for the fire. There was no hair left on the nigger's privates, and the eyes, now, were wide open, as white as the eyes of a clown or a doll. The smoke now carried a terrible odor across the clearing, the odor of something burning which was both sweet and rotten. (246-247, original emphasis)

Baldwin's description of the event captures the rhythm of the lynch mob's response to its own pleasure. The image of Jesse masturbating, as he remembers the lynching, to revive his impaired sense of masculine virility is reproduced in Baldwin's description of the two white men who enhance the mob's pleasure by flaunting their complete control over the timing and method of the Black man's torturous death.

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phenotypical traits from generation to generation. Race amounts foremost to a set of fundamental

Baldwin's description of the white men using their hands to manipulate the seemingly enormous body of the Black victim between them draws its power from Jesse's recollections of the relative size of the victim— "he was a big man, a bigger man than his father, and black as an African jungle Cat, and naked"—and yields an astonishingly subversive caricature of white, masculine power vis-à-vis Black, masculinity (246). The image of the older men raising and lowering the chain on which the Black male victim is suspended links the white men's nurturing of their own desire (and Jesse's masturbation) to their corresponding dependence on, obsession with, and fear of the Black male body and its literal and figurative markers of masculinity and authority. Although the Black man's head bears a cranial marker of masculine sameness in the form of a widow's peak that resembles one borne by both Jesse and his father, such markers of sameness are interrupted by corporeal differences between the bodies of the white male spectators and participants and that of the Black male victim. Jesse's memory of the older, white men lifting and lowering the large, Black male body between them emphasizes their enormous power over the Black male body whose life is literally in their hands. At the same time, Baldwin's description undermines the image of the white men's power over the Black male body which, engorged as it is by historically and culturally constructed images of Black masculinity, seems almost to control them.

In the final, climactic moments of the story, and of the lynching itself, one of the white men cradles the victim's "privates in his hand . . . as though he were weighing them" (247). Baldwin writes: "[i]n the cradle of the one white hand, the nigger's privates seemed as remote as meat being weighed in the scales; but seemed

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prohibitions on the discharge of sexual energies" ("Black Men" 110).

heavier, too, much heavier, . . . and huge, huge, much bigger than his father's, flaccid, hairless, the largest thing he had ever seen till then, and the blackest" (248). As the white man severs the penis, "cutting the dreadful thing away, and the blood came roaring down," Jesse experiences a surge of love for his father as he realizes that his father "had revealed to him a great secret which would be the key to his life forever." (248). Jesse is reassured by his memory of "what had been a wound between what had been [the Black male victim's] legs" that he still knows the secret and, therefore, still has the key to which his father had given him access years ago. His memory of the wound left by the severing of the Black man's penis reassures Jesse that the threat to his adult, white, male body has been averted, temporarily at least, and that, for the moment, it bears no marker of such lack. As the story concludes, Jesse turns to his wife and assures her that he is now able to "do [her] like a nigger" (249). Jesse's memory of the lynching and his use of that memory as a fantasy to stimulate himself illustrates in sexually graphic detail the literal effects of white males' mythic conceptions of Black sexuality (Wiegman 97).[87]

The white lore cycle centered on the black penis continues to turn throughout the twentieth century in ways that are inscribed with both the subtleties of the

[87] As Wiegman puts it: "[c]aught there, within the framework of a subjectively reductive sexualization, the phallicized black male displays the anxieties and contradictions underlying the 'logic' and disciplinary practices of white masculine supremacy; in reducing the black male to the body and further to the penis itself, white masculinity betrays a simultaneous desire for and disavowal of the black male's phallic inscription. To put this another way, the white male desires the image he must create in order to castrate, and it is precisely through the mythology of the black male as mythically endowed rapist that he has effectively done this. In the process, the creation of a narrative of black male sexual excess simultaneously exposes and redirects the fear of castration from the white masculine to the black male body, and it is in the lynch scene that this transfer moves from the realm of the psychosexual to the material" (98).

minstrel show and the horrific violence of lynching rituals.[88] The lore of the black male as criminal and the lore of the black penis remain operative and visible in the realm of professional basketball. In the turn of the white lore cycle that marks the later twentieth century, such lore informs the racialized, masculine 'games' (both literal and figural) that are being played out on the professional basketball court and through media representations of Black male athletes. The form and manner of the 'games' through which whites managed the tension between their fear of and desire for Black men in the past are contiguous with the methods of protecting and recuperating white masculine authority deployed in and around the professional sports arena today. I turn now to a discussion of the evolution of the sport of professional basketball into the racialized locus that it is today.

III

I begin my discussion of basketball's place in white lore cycles by briefly gesturing to the important, and similarly paradoxical, place that basketball occupies in African American communities. Basketball courts in Black neighborhoods represent sites where verbal and athletic skills are honed, reputations are acquired or lost, and the tensions of everyday life are released and temporarily overshadowed by the pleasure and the intensity of the game. As Nathan McCall puts it in his autobiography *Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America* (1994), in the neighborhood in which he grew up "[e]verybody was tradition-bound to learn to shoot hoops. Those who could hawk ball were respected almost as much as those who

[88] Robin Kelley, for example, claims that "[l]ynching is essential for understanding the history and character of police violence in the America of the twenty-first century precisely because it reveals the sexual and gendered dimensions of maintaining the color line and disciplining Black bodies" (27). As a case in point, he notes the beating and rape of Abner Louima by officers of the NYPD (28).

could dress well, rap, and fight" (56). Wideman offers us two very different perspectives of basketball games played by Black men on neighborhood courts which meld together in a reference to the racialized 'games' that take place off court, in which Black men are implicated, and which function as paradoxical sites of containment wrought by white lore concerning Black masculinity.[89] In his novel *The Lynchers* (1973), for instance, Wideman describes the dynamics of a Sunday morning pick-up game. He emphasizes the unique relationship between players and spectators when he describes how "reputations were made and dismantled as the bystanders with the words and noises participated in the game. There were no passive spectators" (107). In keeping with this relationship, Wideman makes a compelling link when he compares the flow and rhythm of the game, which resembles "the sound of the ocean as sudden pauses in the game would be marked by a crescendo of angry voices, deep, male voices disputing a foul or an out of bounds," to a performance of "gut bucket jazz" (107).[90] To those who are not privy to the meanings of the calls-and-responses

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[89] Wideman invokes basketball in almost all of his work. He has recently written a book which uses Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* as its model to explore his relationship to the game and the importance of the game to the American and African American experience. *Hoop Roots*, published by Houghton Mifflin, is scheduled for release in October 2001.

[90] Wideman's comparison of the flow of a pick-up game to a jazz performance is provocative. As I discuss later in this chapter, the integration of the game is accompanied by a much-resisted shift towards the so-called 'schoolyard' style of play. It is possible to compare the changes in the game that followed its integration to the characteristics of a jazz performance. For example, as Boyd notes in *Am I Black Enough For You?: Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond* (1997), although "there is no exclusive way of defining 'Blackness,' . . . a certain criteria must be in place. The heart of these criteria is the sustained articulation of an oral culture, which is most often presented in the form of improvisation. Thus jazz is an obvious signifier of African American culture" (113). Further, he argues, the best basketball players, a group in which Boyd highlights Michael Jordan, play the best of classroom ball while adding nuance to the formal performance through their "reliance on tenets of Black oral culture as they relate to the game" (111). Finally, it is worth noting that prior to the popularization of the 'schoolyard' style, the performance of the team as a whole was considered more important than that of any individual. The incorporation of showy moves such as the slam dunk have had the effect of highlighting individual performances. It is possible to liken the changes in basketball to one of the primary differences between blues and jazz performances. Whereas blues performances traditionally feature a single performer, jazz performances take the form of a complex pattern of

that flow across the boundaries of the court, the patterns of action and interaction in this game of hoops signify only misdirected, unintelligible chaos and confusion. As Wideman puts it, "[to] a stranger the anger would seem violently out of proportion" (107). However, to those whose senses are attuned to the 'lower frequencies' of the Sunday-morning games that are won or lost depending on players' skills, the performances represent nothing less than brilliantly crafted narratives of survival.[91]

In these games the Black men, who on the other six days of the week were "classed as dishwashers and janitors or men who carried mail, men who scuffled to make ends meet for themselves and their families," exit those roles to "play . . . the game the way it should be played" (109). The game, as it is played on Sundays at least, takes the men "as far away from this earth as the sanctified people in the storefront churches just down the block, singing and shaking their way to glory" and offers the men both an escape from and the wherewithal to "slip into the nonentity, the innocuousness demanded of them as they encountered the white world" on Monday morning (109, 108). That is, in important ways, their participation in the Sunday games reassures the players that their work-a-day worlds have not extinguished the "fluid inevitability" which, "no matter how high the others jumped,

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interaction in which the performances of individual musicians and those of the entire band are highlighted at different points in time. Similarly, basketball has evolved into a game in which individual players and their unique skills become more or less visible at various points throughout the game, while always remaining important to the team's performance as a whole.

[91] I take this example from Wideman's novel *The Lynchers* which is the story of a group of Black men who devise a plan to lynch a white police officer. Although all of the men in the group embrace the idea of the lynching and participate in the construction of the plan, the plan itself serves different functions for each of them. For some, engaging in the construction of a narrative about the lynching of a white man provides them with the wherewithal to play the 'game' by continuing to get up each morning and go to work each day. For other members of the group, only the literal execution of the plan would be enough to make them feel as though they had won the 'game' into which they had been forced as Black men. For all of them, the 'game' remains to be won or lost and each of them must determine the best way to make sure that he comes out top.

no matter what impossible refinements their skills brought into the game," enables them to return to the playground courts each Sunday where strength and pride "bloom again and again" in "these men so real, so richly full of life" (109).[92]

In *Hiding Place* (1988), Wideman suggests that there are limits to the freedom that African American males find on playground basketball courts. *Hiding Place* tells the story of Tommy, a young Black man who is trying to elude capture by the police. In this text, Wideman describes a basketball game from Tommy's perspective. In the game that Tommy observes, the players appear to be engaged as enthusiastically as those whom Wideman describes in *The Lynchers*. Wideman writes:

> Ball players half-naked out there under that hot sun, working harder than niggers ever did picking cotton. They shine. They glide and leap and fly at each other like their dark bodies are at the ends of invisible strings. This time of day the court is hot as fire. Burn through your shoes. Maybe that's why the niggers play like they do, running and jumping so much because the ground's too hot to stand on. (61)

The players whom Tommy observes seem less like free agents and more like marionettes whose performances are underscored by complex dynamics of pleasure and pain, desire and fear. The playground court, which takes the form of "a big concrete hole . . . where people piss and throw bottles like you got two points for shooting them in," and which is marked by "[w]hat's left of a backstop dropping like a rusty spiderweb from tall metal poles" and "the flaking mesh" of a screen, seems, in both form and function, less like a sanctified church and more like a prison cell

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[92] Like Tupac's THUG LIFE and EXODUS 1811 tattoos, Wideman's description of the Sunday morning basketball games reflects a similar disregard for a boundary between the sacred and the secular. Like the churchgoers who attend weekly services, the Black men return to the courts each week so that might once again have the "emotional experience of being filled with the power of the spiritual" which will sustain them in the week to come (Smitherman 91-92).

(62).[93] In significant ways, the contradictions and paradoxes of the neighborhood game, or 'game,' are reproduced in the professional arena where racial power plays are highly visible and regularly enacted.

Arguments that locate professional basketball as a place where racism remains operative are frequently met with doubt couched in references to the salaries of NBA players and the fact that for many Black males the sport offers an alternative to a life assumed otherwise to be destined for places considerably less desirable.[94] For instance, McCall recalls watching professional ballgames and admiring the Black

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[93] In *Philadelphia Fire* (1990), Wideman addresses, by indirection, the complexities of the 'games' in which African American males find themselves implicated when he describes what typically happens when a game of basketball lasts beyond the hours of daylight. He writes: "If you keep playing, the failing light is no problem. Your eyes adjust and the streetlamps come on and they help some. People pass by think you're crazy playing basketball in the dark, but if you stay in the game you can see enough. Ball springs at you quicker from the shadows. Pill surprises you and zips by you unless you know it's coming. Part of being in the game is anticipating, knowing who's on the court with you and what they're likely to do. It's darker. Not everything works now that works in daylight. Trick is knowing what does. And staying within that range. You could be blind and play if the game's being played right so you stay out past the point people really seeing. You just know what's supposed to be happening. Dark changes things but you can manage much better than anyone not in the game would believe. Still there comes a point you'll get hurt if you don't give it up. Not the other team you're fighting then, but the dark, and it always wins, you know it's going to win so what you're doing doesn't make sense, it's silly and you persist in the silliness a minute or two, a pass pops you in your chest, a ball rises and comes down in the middle of three players and nobody even close to catching it. You laugh and go with the silliness. Can't see a damn thing anymore. Whether a shot's in or out. Hey, O.T., man. Show some teeth so I can see you, motherfucker. Somebody trudges off the court. Youall can have it. I can't see shit. The rest laugh and give it up too. You fade to the sidelines. It's been dark a long time at the court's edges" (39). In this passage, Wideman speaks to the tactics that Black men employ so as to function as freely and with as much dignity as possible in environments that are designed to deny them such opportunities. In Chapter Four, I explore Richard Wright's short story "The Man Who Lived Underground" in which the protagonist, like the men in Wideman's passage who play their game in the dark, discovers that it is possible to function with some degree of agency in the dark. In Wright's story, however, the protagonist fails to master the trick of "knowing what does" and what does not enable a Black man to function more freely and with dignity in both Black and white worlds.

[94] Kenneth Shropshire, in "Deconstructing the NBA," calls attention to studies conducted during the 1990s that revealed certain troubling racial inequalities in terms of wages and job security in the NBA. One such study revealed a wage gap between white and Black players with whites receiving salaries that were between 11 and 25 percent higher than those of Black players (78). A 1999 study took note of "exit discrimination" in the NBA and found that "White players have a 36 percent lower risk of being cut than black players . . . translating into an expected career length of 7.5 seasons for an apparently similar player who is white and 5.5 seasons for the same player who is black" (79).

players who seem more self-assured on the basketball court than anywhere else (373). As he puts it:

> They did things that required amazing coordination of timing and thought. They moved with the speed and grace of gazelles. And they welcomed pressure and made last-minute clutch plays that were outta sight. I concluded that brothers shone so well shooting hoops because the basketball court was the one place white Americans let them know they believed in them. (373)

Similarly, Todd Boyd, in "The Game is to be Sold, Not to be Told," admires Black men whose superior basketball skills enable them to take advantage of the myriad opportunities that go hand-in-hand with playing in the NBA, not the least of which is getting "paid for their unique contribution to the culture" (xi). As Boyd puts it, "[t]hat's the American Dream, ain't it?" (xi)

Nonetheless, John Hoberman, in *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race* (1997), addresses the issue of resistance to the notion that racist worldviews and agendas manifest themselves in sport when he contends that resistance to the argument that race relations inflect the world of sports in the United States "is rooted in an uncritical faith in the model of equal opportunity, which envisions a linear expansion of minority participation and power over time" (32). Such uncritical faith may not seem startling when one considers that basketball is, after all, a form of entertainment. Indeed, some would go so far as to argue that its status as a sport and a form of entertainment renders basketball unworthy of critical investigation and political interrogation. Yet, Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire, in their introduction to *Basketball Jones: America Above the Rim* (2000), assert that basketball bears a far greater influence on American popular culture and national identity than any other sport including baseball and

football. Whereas baseball continues to occupy an important place in United States' sports nostalgia and tradition, basketball functions "perfectly as a symbol of contemporary America" (5, 3).[95] Given basketball's importance on the American scene, it seems more accurate to characterize uncritical faith as critical blindness. That is, in a way that no other sport has, with the exception of boxing, professional basketball reflects histories of racist practices and racialized representations of Black men in the United States. Thus, the history of professional basketball and the images of Black players represent compelling subjects because of the ways that they shape and are shaped by white lore of the Black male as a criminal and a figure of bestial sexual excess. Critical blindness with respect to the significance of basketball within the racial organization of the United States is particularly dangerous because it fosters the continuous turning of lore cycles that structure a broader system of containment in the form of a prison-writ-large. As Boyd puts it in his essay "Mo' Money, Mo' Problems," "in basketball, race, directly or indirectly, *is* the conversation at all times" (60, original emphasis).[96]

Accordingly, I read basketball as a site in which subtle forms of racism directed towards Black players replicate those that structure the United States as a

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[95] Boyd and Shropshire contend that "[n]either baseball nor football has any significance in the world at large. They are primarily American sports" (1). They note that the United States' "political, economic, and cultural prominence in the world is amplified by its massive presence" in the Olympic games generally, and in the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona specifically (1). In the case of basketball, the fact that "during some off time at the 1992 Olympics, Michael Jordan found himself confronted by an enormous billboard of himself flying through the air" speaks to the extent to which "Jordan and, by extension, the game of basketball now occupy a prime position on the global stage. . . . [O]ne could not imagine the same happening to Mark McGwire, or to John Elway, for that matter. . . . At a time when America sought to reassert itself through sport on a global stage, in an increasingly global world, basketball seems in retrospect not only the right choice but the only choice" (1).

[96] Though largely anecdotal, University of Washington English Professor David Shields' *Black Planet: Facing Race During an NBA Season* (1999) provides a fascinating look at the 'racial conversation' over the course of a season during which he watched and studied the Seattle Supersonics.

prison-writ-large. Basketball in the United States is rife with examples of what John Fiske calls the "two main strategies by which the dominant attempt . . . to control the leisure and pleasures of the subordinate" (70). Those two strategies include both the construction and enforcement of repressive legislation and the 'taming' of uncontrolled leisure pursuits into 'respectable' and disciplined forms (70). As Fiske explains:

> Anything out of control is always a potential threat, and always calls up moral, legal, and aesthetic powers to discipline it. The signs of the subordinate out of control terrify the forces of order (whether moral, legal, or aesthetic), they constitute a constant reminder of both how fragile social control is and how it is resented; they demonstrate how escaping social control, even momentarily, produces a sense of freedom. That this freedom is often expressed in excessive, "irresponsible" (i.e. disruptive or disorderly—the adjectives are significant) behavior is evidence both of the vitality of these disruptive popular forces and the extent of their repression in everyday life. (69)

The evidence of such strategies for control of the leisure, pleasure, and work of Black male athletes and some players' resistance to such control is evident at all levels of the professional game. The nature and function of the containment to which Black athletes are subject in the NBA becomes apparent when we look more closely at the political and literal positions of the players vis-à-vis management and spectators, the athletes' attire, the dimensions and layout of the court, and the style and rules of play. These arrangements and characteristics function collectively to tease the boundaries between (Black) players and (white) audiences by, on the one hand encouraging and, on the other hand controlling, activities and interactions between Black men and whites that are interpreted and responded to quite differently in less controlled settings.

For instance, at its most rudimentary level basketball represents yet another site in which Black men do the work and provide entertainment for mostly white audiences while whites run the show. As Julianne Mavleaux notes in her essay "Gladiators, Gazelles, and Groupies: Basketball Love and Loathing,"

> the rules and profit of the game reinforce the rules, profit, and history of American life . . . Black men who entertain serve as stalkers for white men who measure profits. Neutered black men can join their white colleagues in cha-chinging cash registers but can never unlock the golden handcuffs and the platinum muzzles that limit their ability to generate independent opinions. (56)

And, as documentaries such as *Hoop Dreams* (1994) suggest, and as Todd Boyd notes in his preface to *Out of Bounds: Sports, Media, and the Politics of Identity* (1997), there does indeed seem something innately criminal about a system that offers young, often disadvantaged, Black men opportunities for upward mobility only to subject them to alternative forms of bondage within the NBA (ix).[97] The paradox, as Shields points out in *Fear of a Black Planet*, is that "[i]n the NBA, as nowhere else in America, white people are utterly beholden to black people . . . it is a kind of very mild payback for the last five hundred years" (91).[98]

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[97] Lindon Barrett, in "Black Men in the Mix: Badboys, Heroes, Sequins, and Dennis Rodman," makes a similar point when he questions how "post-civil rights U.S. culture arrives at a situation in which it nimbly negotiates the allowance to take routine, unbridled pleasure in African-American 'young guys'" (108). Further, Barrett argues, "post-civil rights U.S. culture performs the seemingly impossible incorporation of African-American 'young guys' within structures of desire to which they are characteristically considered alien. Whereas these structures of desire are defined by the notion that the 'sanitary normativity of all the sexual roles within the . . . family is a necessary precondition for [the family's] function as the emotional and moral rehabilitative center' of social life, African Americans as a collective are most fully understood as agents antithetical to any 'emotional and moral rehabilitative center.' In other words, within the structures of desire detailing 'sanitary normativity,' the very concept of racial blackness articulates a crisis that would seem to preclude—even if market driven—the nimble negotiations on which the NBA depends" (110).

[98] Shields argues further that in the "NBA an enormous amount of money is given to a few hundred black men in order, it sometimes seems, to make up for society's collective guilt, but it doesn't work. There will never be enough money stuffed into the wounds to stop the bleeding. White people revere and resent this concentration of triumphant blackness; black players, as if charged with the task of

Boyd and Shropshire attribute public receptiveness both to basketball and basketball players to the intimacy of the game itself and to the identification between fans and individual players (or at least the images of those players) that such intimacy fosters (3). They attribute the greater intimacy of basketball, as compared to other popular sports in which Black athletes predominate, namely baseball and football, to the fact that "the players' faces are easy to see and thus easy to use in advertisements" (3). Indeed, they liken what they call the "cult of personality" that grows out of such intimacy to that which characterizes the relationships between Hollywood celebrities and their fans (5). David Halberstam, in *Playing for Keeps: Michael Jordan and the World He Made* (1999), also highlights the intimacy of basketball compared to baseball and football when he links improvements in various types of technology, including satellites, cameras and televisions, to fans' increased perceptions of intimacy between themselves and basketball players (131). As well, Halberstam argues that the minimal uniforms of basketball players, along with their acrobatic movements and their ability to play both offense and defense, enable players to project a degree of physical and emotional intimacy that is not apparent in football (131). As Halberstam puts it, "a superstar in basketball, one truly surpassing player with only four other men on the court with him, playing both offense and defense, could dominate the play and fire the imagination of the public as one baseball player among nine or more or one football player among twenty-two never could" (131). Further, in contrast to football and baseball uniforms, basketball uniforms neither

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getting retribution for black people everywhere, act like the most pampered divas: *I will take absolutely no shit from you; the terms will be as follows . . .*" (120, original emphasis).

protect nor conceal the athletes' bodies nor hide their expressions of emotion during play. One fan, whom Shields cites, notes:

> In football, they've got all these pads and they've got this helmet on; they don't even look like human beings anymore. In basketball, they're very clearly real men: you can see their faces, you can see their bodies, they're not distorted in any sense, and they're sweating. You can see their muscles, and they're up against each other . . . it's just, you know, bodies on bodies and it's totally erotic. (59)

Shields' fan also attributes the NBA's imposition of rules that make it illegal for players to touch each other on the back, to hand check or to taunt each other, to the homoerotic nature of the game (59). Whereas the NBA explained its imposition of such rules as efforts to control the increasing level of violence in basketball games, the fan reads the rule changes as an effort to limit audiences' exposure to images of emotional Black men touching each other (Shields 59-60). The fan concludes, in "American culture the most dangerous symbol, the most frightening symbol, for white people, is black men in love. The moment black men love each other, the United States is done for" (Shields 60). Perhaps this fan is right given that the image of an emotional, loving community of Black males does not accord with hegemonic images of aggressive Black males whose sole purposes in life are to destroy self and community. In ways absent from other sports, then, the blackness, sexuality, and the physical and emotional vulnerability of the majority of the players are stamped on the face of the game of basketball.

Whereas basketball has changed considerably since the professional game was integrated in 1951, one trait that has remained constant at all its levels is the aggressive manner in which the game is played. Today, basketball is not a sport that one immediately associates with aggressive play in comparison to, say, prize fighting.

If one stops and thinks about it, though, the basketball court and the game itself bear a striking resemblance to the Battle royals that were popular throughout Reconstruction and into the twentieth century (George 14).[99] In the early years of the twentieth century, basketball was renowned for its overt, physical violence. In 1908, Charles Eliot, then the president of Harvard, called for basketball to be banned on the grounds that the game had become more brutal than football (George 7). As Thomas G. Gryant, a player for the University of Kentucky Wildcats from 1905 to 1907, remarked, "[w]e didn't play for championships but for bloody noses" (qtd in George 7). One response to the violence of the game was the installation of mesh and wire screens around basketball courts that stayed in place until the 1940s (George 7). The screens were intended to protect fans from players, players from fans, and the referees from both players and fans (George 7).[100] The removal of the protective screens just prior to the integration of the game created a heightened sense of intrigue and risk that the presence of Black players would only increase.

This is not to say that the removal of the protective screens was a conscious attempt to play on the racialized fears of white spectators. Indeed, as this dissertation

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[99] Nelson George explains in *Elevating the Game* (1992), "[o]f America's major professional sports only boxing maintained a consistent level of African-American participation in the 1900s. In large part that's because the spectacle of Black men fighting each other was quite familiar to whites. Battle royals, where for prize money a dozen or so Black men were blindfolded, ushered into a ring, and told to fight until one man was left standing, were extremely popular" (14). Ralph Ellison describes a Battle Royal early in *Invisible Man*. The battle takes place on the day that the narrator graduates from high school. The Battle Royal is a fight in which the narrator and some of his schoolmates are forced to participate to entertain "the town's big shots" (17). The battle takes place on a "gleaming space of polished floor" inside of a "big mirrored hall" (17-18). The boys (all Black) are blindfolded and required to fight with one another. After the fight, the floor is electrified and covered with "coins of all dimensions and a few crumpled bills" (26). The boys do not know at first that the floor has been electrified and that their painful scrambling for the money is meant to be yet another form of entertainment for the men who have gathered to watch.

[100] The reference to basketball players as 'cagers' stems from this period during which "Roman Colosseum-like barrier[s]" separated athletes from spectators (George 7).

suggests, actions that feed whites' fears of and desires for Black men have rarely been so overt. Rather, I am suggesting that the timing of the screens' removal, which is coincident with the integration of Black players in professional leagues, may have affected the ways that whites perceived and experienced their increased exposure to Black male athletes in the particularly provocative context of a basketball game. Nowadays, the perimeter of the court is defined only by chairs that are occupied by athletes, formally attired members of the mostly white, mostly male, management conglomerate, as well as members of the press and celebrities. This human barrier serves two paradoxical functions in relation to the court. On the one hand, like the cage, it reminds players of the boundaries within which they are expected to perform in ways that are innovative, aggressive, and entertaining without violating the rules of the game. On the other hand, the human boundary denies spectators the security of a more solid physical barrier between themselves and the ten very large, mostly Black, very aggressive male athletes who control the tenuously contained and relatively small space of the court. The physical layout of a basketball court and the figures who assume roles on and around it thus create a framework that mobilizes a peculiar combination of desire and fear wrought almost entirely on the backs of Black male athletes.

The size of the court and the so-called 'black' or 'schoolyard' style of play that has come to characterize professional basketball games also contribute to the sensation of fear and desire that the absence of a stable boundary between spectators and players produces. The court itself is small compared to a football field or an ice surface—ninety four by fifty feet—and seems even smaller once ten large players

take the floor. Jeff Greenfield notes in his essay "The Black and White Truth about Basketball":

> It takes a conscious effort to realize how constricted the space is on a basketball court. Place a regulation court (ninety-four by fifty feet) on a football field, and it will reach from the back of the end zone to the twenty-one-yard line; its width will cover less than a third of the field. On a baseball diamond, a basketball court will reach from home plate to just beyond first base. Compared to its principal indoor rival, ice hockey, basketball covers about one-fourth the playing area. And during the normal flow of the game, most of the action takes place on about the third of the court nearest the basket. It is in this dollhouse space that ten men, each of them half a foot taller than the average man, come together to battle each other. (374)

Although the dimensions of the court did not change when the professional game was integrated, the stylistic changes that Black players brought to the game significantly altered the ways in which both spectators and players perceive and situate themselves in relation to that contained space.[101]

One of the most notable changes that accompanied integration was a shift away from the ritualized, orderly style of play known as 'classroom ball' towards a more stylistic, improvisational 'schoolyard style.' As African Americans have so

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[101] Many critics have argued that the so-called schoolyard style reflects the influences of a Black aesthetic. For instance, Gena Dagel Caponi, citing Michael Novak, identifies basketball as a medium that enables "the mythic world of the black experience" to enter American life while undergoing minimal change (2). According to Novak, the "game is corporate like black life; improvisatory like black life; formal and yet casual; swift and defiant; held back, contained, and then exploding; full of leaps and breakaway fluid sprints" (Caponi 2). Similarly, Greenfield notes the influence of a Black aesthetic when he contends that there exists a "clear difference between 'black' and 'white' styles of play" (374). Both 'black' and 'white' styles of play bear the mark of different ways of responding to the contained space of the court. Whereas white players gain mastery on the court by sheer intensity, Black players employ their athletic skills to "adapt to the limits of space imposed by the game" (Greenfield 374). The 'black' style of play that Greenfield identifies is better suited to the restraints of the size of the court which demands that players master "the subtlest of skills: the head fake, the shoulder fake, shift of body weight to the right and the sudden cut to the left" so as to defeat an opponent through clever acts of deception (374). Thus, Greenfield concludes, in basketball, as in many a Black man's life, "[d]eception is crucial to success; and to young men who have learned early and painfully that life is a battle for survival, basketball is one of the few games in which the weapon of deception is a legitimate rule and not the source of trouble" (374). Though I employ Caponi's and Greenfield's explanations of basketball and a Black aesthetic I also note that they come precariously close to essentializing that aesthetic.

frequently done in other areas of performance, the styles of play that characterize professional basketball, the slam dunk in particular, are indicative of the ways in which Black men incorporate the vernacular into a formal structure (Boyd "The Game" x). The slam dunk is a move where players jump and "with once two, now one hand, force (dunk, stuff, jam) the ball directly through the basket" (George xvi). The inclusion of the slam dunk shifted play from a horizontal to a vertical plane, thereby literally elevating the game and also transforming the court into a three-dimensional playing field.[102] Further, as Davis Houck notes in his essay "Attacking the Rim: the Cultural Politics of Dunking," the slam dunk is attended by a culture of violence signified by the sheer force with which players slam (153). Indeed, in many instances "the rim is often quite literally attacked, frequently leaving hands, wrists, and forearms bloodied and bruised" (Houck 154). The emphasis produced by the aggression of the gesture suggests that the move is as much about violence as it is about artistry, grace, and athleticism (Houck 153). Moreover, the best dunks are considered to be those that are directed at an opposing player, rendering the move arguably the "ultimate 'weapon' on the basketball court, an expression in the literal sense of the word . . . accompanied by the vernacular of violence" (Houck 156). The combination of an increasingly disorderly, improvisational, and unpredictable style of play and the almost entirely Black make up of professional basketball teams creates the illusion of a smaller, more aggressive, and less secure court from the point of

[102] The ability to execute a dunk had eluded most players and had been discouraged by coaches from the game's inception in 1891 until the 1950s when Black high school players began to use the slam dunk as a means of intimidating other teams (George xvi-xvii). During the 1970s the "Black ability to dunk 'with authority' became, in the wide-open American Basketball Association . . . an integral part of professional basketball's tapestry" (George xvii).

view of the spectator.[103] The spectators' proximity and openness to the athletes and the action on the court creates the unease that derives from the structure of fear and desire so important to spectators' pleasure.

Today, the style of the game has become such that basketball spectators expect to see players, mostly Black males, engaging aggressively with one another. Although the structure of the court denies spectators, mostly white, a protective distance from the objects of their voyeuristic gazes, the style of the game reinforces the pervasive image of Black males as dangerous figures. This image is in keeping with one of the most overt methods of containment to which Black athletes are subject and which arises from the dominant image of Black masculinity in the United States. That image arises from what Hoberman identifies as "the merger of the athlete, the gangster rapper, and the criminal into a single black male persona that the sports industry, the music industry, and the advertising industry have made . . . predominant" (xviii). This merger leads to what Hoberman refers to as the dangerous 'twinning' of 'the violent black male' with the spectacular black athlete (xviii). White America's eagerness to conflate the Black athlete, the rap artist, and the criminal into a single image of Black masculinity leads to the construction of all Black males as

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[103] Nelson George contends that manifestations of African American basketball style are not always physical but are always aggressive: "Verbal intimidation on the court (a.k.a. 'the selling of wulf tickets') is a large part of the operating dynamic. Wulf tickets are intended to demoralize opponents by demeaning their intelligence, judgment, self-respect, manhood, and overall claims to humanity. Words like 'sucker,' 'turkey,' 'lame,' along with a constantly evolving variety of others, usually compounded by some artfully articulated obscenity, are employed to undermine the thin-skinned. Like 'the dozens,' a verbal trial by insult practiced among Blacks for generations, these taunts are essential to the game's component of one upmanship and to psychological combat. . . . In fact, most Black ball expressions are about elevating oneself by embarrassing others" (xvi). Trash talking assumes physical as well as verbal forms. As Phil Taylor notes in an article in *Sports Illustrated*, "[y]ou don't have to open your mouth to talk trash. There are ways to get a message across nonverbally, as Atlanta's Dikembe Mutombo does by wagging his finger after blocking a shot" (8). The NBA has attempted to increase its control over this aspect of the game as well by making it possible for a player to receive a $500 fine and a technical foul if he is caught trash talking (Taylor 8).

dangerous, frightening, and offensive figures (Hoberman xix). White Americans remain comfortable with, indeed they derive enormous pleasure from, the physical and cultural space that professional basketball occupies, so long as Black men's displays of aggression are confined to the court itself. However, whites become far less comfortable when they encounter Black males behaving aggressively in off-court settings. An even closer look at the off-court game(s) in which Black male athletes are implicated provides strong evidence that white America manages its discomfort by mobilizing images of Black males both as childlike creatures and as innately violent and hypersexualized men in peculiar and often ironic ways. In the remainder of this chapter, I call attention to particular examples which indicate that such fears of Black masculine authority and mythic conceptions of Black male sexuality continue to inform the more recent and more subtle racial and masculine contests played out through representations and performances of Black male basketball players.

IV

Take, for example, the incident involving Latrell Sprewell, former team member of the Golden State Warriors and current member of the New York Knicks. On 1 December 1997, Sprewell allegedly choked and threatened to kill then-Warriors coach P.J. Carlesimo.[104] The incident, according to Shropshire in "Deconstructing the NBA," "had varying undertones of the dominant form of racism that permeates American society: aversive or unconscious racism" (76). The extent to which the

[104] Shropshire notes the lack of consensus as to nature of the Sprewell incident when he writes: "The greatest variation in the telling is the level of provocation and the degree to which Sprewell 'cooled down' before" returning to the practice floor and threatening Carlesimo again (81).

media represented the incident in ways that vilified Sprewell through the use of derogatory images of Black men and as though it occurred outside of any explanatory context and without provocation suggests that Shropshire is correct in his assertion. According to Sprewell, he was provoked by verbal abuse from Carlesimo, who is renowned for his aggressive, insulting, and confrontational coaching style.[105] As a result of the attack on his coach, Sprewell received a sixty-eight-game, seven-month suspension which ultimately cost him $6.4 million for the season (Branch). Sprewell's punishment was significantly harsher than that of white NFL football player Kevin Greene, who just over one year later, "attacked one of his coaches on the sidelines, in full view of a stadium full of fans and a network television audience" and received only a single-game suspension (Brunt). One journalist questioned such disparities when he observed that "these things certainly upset the country a lot more when it is a Black player going after a white coach . . . Why aren't they as outraged about a stringy-haired Hollywood Hogan wannabe as they were with a rich African-American basketball player, his hair arranged in neat cornrows?" (Miller 39)

Although some would argue that Carlesimo's reputation as a coach was tarnished by the incident, his ethnicity was not used to contextualize his behavior as race was in Sprewell's case. In fact, in contrast to Carlesimo, whose role in the incident was given little, if any, serious attention, Sprewell was vilified by the NBA,

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[105] Sprewell's explanation seems quite plausible in view of Malveaux's suggestion that Sprewell's violent behavior may well have been a reaction to the tendency of many coaches, including Carlesimo, to use racial expletives to "motivate" their players (53). San Francisco mayor Willie Brown would seem to concur with such a position given his response to a request for his take on the incident: "His boss may have needed choking . . . I'm not justifying what Sprewell did as right. But nobody is asking why he did it or what might have prompted him" (Shropshire 86). Finally, Shropshire, as have many other critics since, locates Sprewell's action within a larger framework of resistance by reading it in the same light as the players' positions in the NBA lockout that followed closely on the heels of the incident as "a stand against power" (77).

the media, and basketball fans. As Sprewell claims: "I've been looked on as a negative person, . . . I've been vilified. Every time I look at a clip it's always a picture of me looking mad and being aggressive" (Gloster). There exists considerable evidence to suggest that Sprewell's claim is not far fetched. Indeed, in one article about the incident, Carlesimo's infamous coaching style is characterized merely as behavior that "often annoys players" ("Sprewell"). In contrast, the same article employs considerably more inflammatory language when it characterizes Sprewell's response to Carlesimo's "annoying" behavior as an "ugly incident [that] was the culmination of Sprewell's long-simmering dislike of Carlesimo" (Sprewell).[106] Elsewhere, upon Sprewell's return as a New York Knick to play in Oakland, an article labeled him a "corn-rowed anti-hero" and characterized his response to the crowd's "predictably rude reception" as "akin to that of a garbage-picking raccoon" (Feschuk "Sprewell"). Other examples of the ways in which the media vilified Sprewell include an article entitled, significantly, "The Game Within," which claims that "[n]o matter what Sprewell does with the rest of his life, he will forever be known as the Bench-Boss Strangler."[107] The same article, in addition to depicting Sprewell and his action as one and the same, also misrepresents the language characteristic of competitive sport that, ironically, spectators consider to be desirable

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[106] NBA Commissioner David Stern stated during an arbitration hearing which upheld most of the league-imposed penalty against Sprewell, that "the severity of [Sprewell's] punishment was based on the 'clearly premeditated nature' of the attack" (Barkin). The degree to which the attack was premeditated remains open to question. The NBA Players Association claime[illegible]at there "was no premeditated attack" because Sprewell never became calm enough to "premeditate anything" (Shropshire "Deconstructing" 81). Rather, the Association maintained that the "incident was an instantaneous reaction resulting from a month of tension and confrontations between" Sprewell and Carlesimo (Shropshire "Deconstructing 81-82).

[107] Aside from the obvious example of O.J. Simpson, arguably only Mike Tyson and Dennis Rodman have attracted more bad press.

and motivating in other circumstances to the extent that many appropriate it for their own use in the stands: "Sprewell . . . is still thinking violent thoughts about the Warriors. 'I just want to go in there and crush them,' he says. 'I'd just love it if we just killed them . . . Bitterness, hatred, whatever you want to call it, it's there" ("The Game Within").

Another example of Sprewell's vilification is an episode of the syndicated cartoon "In the Bleachers" that aligns Sprewell with tamed lions, or subordinated jungle beasts, who have been made into circus performers. The cartoon depicts three lions being directed by a lion trainer holding both a whip and a pistol. One lion is performing his tricks as directed. The other two are not. One of the resistant lions is saying to the other, "I can't take it anymore. If he gets in my face again, I'm gonna go Sprewell on the guy" (Moore). This cartoon draws on stereotypical associations of Blacks with the jungle and wild animals, the tools that slave masters and overseers, and more recently the police, have employed to punish Blacks, and represents Sprewell as synonymous with violent acts of resistance and insubordination. Such representations of the incident highlight the media's racialized language and imagery, and its resultant racist implications that the incident was the consequence of Sprewell's inability to control himself or his emotional responses. The Sprewell incident brought to the forefront of white America's racial consciousness images of uncontained Black male aggression, thus positioning him in opposition to Black male athletes like Michael Jordan, for instance, to whom acceptance is offered on the condition that he perform the role of a raceless, colorless, and apolitical subject (Shropshire 83).

Just as the Sprewell incident made visible white America's readiness to criminalize the images of Black male athletes who display aggression outside of controlled settings, so too the 1998/99 NBA lockout made visible the extent to which the blackness of most of the players increased the league's determination to maintain control over the bargaining process. Jesse Barkin linked the lockout to the Sprewell incident when he claimed that

> the Sprewell affair left the entire league with a black eye. . . . Sprewell became the poster child for all that is wrong with professional sports. Oddly, Sprewell can no longer be considered the worst blight to hit the NBA since drug scandals rocked the league two decades before. That dubious honor belongs to those responsible for a labor impasse that has forced the cancellation of the first two months of games and threatens to wipe out the entire season. (B11)

During the lockout, however, it became apparent that the 'black eye' with which Barkin claims Sprewell left the league assumed more than one form and represented more than one perspective. Indeed, the perspectives offered from the 'black eyes' of the players and the 'white eyes' of the management and media revealed a good deal about the degree to which race informs the hierarchies the NBA. For instance, the union leaders and all but two players on the negotiating committee were Black, whereas all of the owners and the league's top two officials are white ("National Basketball Association loses"). Interestingly, one journalist suggested that the players had a significant advantage over management in NBA labor negotiations because of their relative size (Jones). Although one NBA spokesperson denied the suggestion, he revealed an underlying fear that it might be true when he noted in the same breath that David Stern is "not a particularly small man" (Jones).[108] Karen Bentham, an

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[108] As Shields notes with respect to the prevailing tendency to deny the obvious, "I'm struck by the fact that in all matters of human communication, when someone makes a point of announcing that

instructor at the University of Toronto's Center for Industrial Relations, articulated the fear of physical attack that underlies the effort to connect physical stature with negotiating power when she commented that, "I'm not sure size is that important . . . You're separated by a table, you have a whole army of supporters on your side, and the likelihood of a physical attack is remote" (Jones).[109] The notion that a boundary such as a table might lessen the likelihood of a physical attack recalls the seemingly perilous court arrangement that resulted from the removal of protective screens shortly before the integration of the professional game. In the case of the lockout, however, there was too much at stake to savor the titillating nature of such tenuous divides. As Bentham noted, cutting directly to the chase: "[m]ore important than your physical size is your economic strength . . . . And the owners are much bigger in that sense" (Jones).

According to some of the players, however, the NBA management's confidence in the justness and the strength of its own position stemmed from far more than its sense of its own fiscal health. As Alonzo Mourning of the Miami Heat noted during the strike, "I think there is a perception from the owners to even some fans that we're blacks who should be happy with what we've got—fair or not. . . . There's a

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something isn't so, it often means that it in fact is so; in matter of human communication relating to race, when someone makes a point of announcing that something isn't so, it means almost without exception that it in fact is so" (10).

[109] The association of large, Black males with the threat of danger is not limited to the sports arena. As David Denby notes with respect to one of the primary characters in the film "The Green Mile," for instance: "John Coffey is seven feet tall and weighs three hundred and thirty pounds, and the movie plays uneasily with the racial drama of a huge black man under the control of some ordinary-sized whites. Of course, nothing but beatific irony is intended: despite his size and his enormous strength, Coffey is so gentle that he wouldn't hurt a mouse. Paul Edgcomb, extending his hand in greeting, immediately senses this. But in 1999, when tall black men with every kind of disposition race up and down the courts of the nation's fantasies, the spectacle of whites accepting a seven-foot black as benevolent has a tinge of bizarre and unnecessary self-congratulation. 'The Green Mile' is a fantasy of

lack of respect given us in large part because we're athletes. I'm not saying it's all about race because it's not—but it plays a factor" ("National Basketball Association loses…."). Similarly, Sam Cassell, who at the time played for the New Jersey Nets, commented, "I think the owners look at us as black ghetto guys with tons of money that we don't deserve" (Brunt). Shropshire concurs with Cassell when he argues that such assertions epitomized the dominant (white) public's reaction to the lockout which was that the players "should be grateful for what [they] have" (83). In contrast, Stern, using language that recalls Hoberman's notion of uncritical faith in equality, denied assertions that race had a role in the stalemate, and argued instead that "the league has successfully promoted a sport whose player population is nearly 90% black" (Brunt). One Black executive dismissed the idea that race was a mitigating factor by suggesting, in equally troubling language, that "[f]rom the time they're 12 years old, [the players are] catered to by AAU coaches, sneaker companies, college recruiters, coaches, agents. We're left dealing with the end result, and no one knows what to do. What the players perceive as racism is . . . a lack of sensitivity based on ignorance" (Voisin). Such dismissals of the players' perspectives entirely overlook the players' experiences and knowledge of what it means to be Black males in the United States. As Brunt puts it so astutely, the players are not "just talking about what's going on now. They're talking about their experiences as black men in America, about history, about culture, about what they've come to understand to be true."

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taming the black giant, passing itself off as liberal humanism. John Coffey is not just good, he's Jesus—he work miracles. Yes, but he's still not a man" (103).

The media's reaction to the Sprewell incident and the efforts to suppress issues of race during the lockout make visible the degree to which audiences construct and rely on less-threatening off-court images of Black males to counterbalance those of the powerful, aggressive, and assertive Black males who populate NBA courts. As the strange invocation of the players' relative size to management in the bargaining process during the lockout suggests, white audiences' fear and desire in relation to aggressive Black male athletes becomes genuine fear when they encounter such aggression, or even its possibility, in off-court settings where power instead of points is at stake (Hoberman xxi). As Hoberman suggests, the consequence of such fear is the construction of off-court images that gentrify and domesticate on-court images of Black athletes so as to "defuse the 'undertone of violence'" that represents such an important component of the pleasure that spectators experience as witnesses to a game (xxi).

V

Nike's 'Fun Police' commercials that aired during the 1997/1998 basketball season are excellent examples of the ways in which the media gentrifies and domesticates the images of professional basketball players. The series of eight Fun Police commercials featured NBA stars such as Gary Payton, Stephon Marbury, and Kevin Garnett and were purportedly an effort to highlight the fun aspects of the game and alter Nike's image, which had been criticized for being too serious. The methodology that Nike employed to reassociate its corporate image and basketball more closely with fun was driven by subtle references to, and inversions of, Black/white power dynamics with powerful referents in both the antebellum and

postbellum eras. The commercials promoted the fun aspects of the game at the expense of images of both Black males generally and the athletes whom the ads featured specifically. In one of the commercials, for instance, the Fun Police—in this case, two Black and one white players—are hotly pursuing a (white) referee who allegedly calls too many "ticky-tac fouls" during games. The implied purpose of the search is to hold the referee accountable for using his authority to undermine the flow of the game and inhibit the style of play that provides so much of the game's entertainment value. The locale and the methods employed in the search, including the use of bloodhounds, allude to historical images of searches in which plantation patrollers, vigilantes, and police sought fugitive slaves, prospective lynching victims, and escaped prisoners.

The commercial alludes directly to such historical referents when one of the Fun Police discovers a white fugitive prisoner cowering beneath a pile of leaves. The 'officer' releases him after quickly identifying that he is not the referee whom they are seeking. The search is interrupted again when the most vigilant of the three Fun Police discovers his two colleagues pausing to enjoy a marshmallow roast. "It's fun," the white 'officer' offers as an explanation for the break. His Black comrade appears to support the explanation for the unauthorized break by way of a minstrel-like grin enhanced by the marshmallow-stuffed black cheeks that lend it form. The search and thus the commercial conclude when the hounds locate the referee who has been treed, not insignificantly, like a 'coon.' The referee's whiteness signifies a racial reversal that, at best, negates, and, at worst, mocks the often horrific outcomes of historical searches in which Black fugitives were sought and that the commercial recalls. That

is, not only does the commercial gloss over the frequently violent nature of the sorts of searches which the Fun Police reenact, but the naming of the Fun Police, the fact that they are dressed in bright yellow raincoats, hats, and rubber boots like children, the stereotypic depiction of and the denial of a voice to the marshmallow-eating character, and the release of a white fugitive prisoner, imply a clear distinction between the authority afforded 'real' Police and that which the Fun Police are permitted to enact in off-court settings. The commercials play on, as they effectively sever, links between Black males and officially-sanctioned authority so as to carry out their purported agendas while reassuring white audiences that the actors pose no threat either on or off-court.

Another of the Nike commercials employs an even more overtly racialized structure. The commercial features NBA players Jason Kidd and Damon Stoudamire who barge unexpectedly into the middle-class home of a white family. Their entrance frightens the white female resident who cowers on a sofa as she pleads with her young son to concede to the demands of the Black men who have invaded their home. The Fun Police, however, are not there to steal from or rape the woman, but wish only to confront her son who has been hogging the ball during basketball games. The Fun Police search the house and discover a closet full of balls which provide evidence that the boy is guilty as charged. Although on one level the commercial advocates a congenial message that condones good sportsmanship, it relies on the easily recognizable image of Black males as criminals to do so. The commercial assumes that viewers will recognize the Black crime narrative that cultivates viewers' pleasure produced by feelings of fear and relief. The popularity of the Fun Police commercials

suggests that Nike was correct in its assumption that there exists a common discourse among viewers as to what can be expected of Black men when they are not otherwise occupied on athletic courts.[110] Indeed, Nike banked on its belief that viewers would grasp the subtexts that the commercial campaign employed to replicate the experience of the spectator in an off-court setting. The company employed those subtexts to produce the undercurrent of excitement and fear that make the experience of viewing the commercial similar to that of watching the basketball games that it aims to promote. Nike's use of such racialized discourses to alter its own image and that of the game of basketball leads me to suggest that the real policing of the 'game' is carried out by NBA management and in the various media campaigns that construct and control the images and behavior of professional Black athletes. Indeed, like the commercial featuring a fugitive referee, this one reassures viewers that big, Black, basketball players pose no threat in off-court settings so long as they are kept running down balls that white boys wish to claim as their own.

VI

Dennis Rodman, the flamboyant, talented, and controversial former player for the Detroit Pistons (1986-92), San Antonio Spurs (1993-95), Chicago Bulls (1995-1998), L.A. Lakers (1999), and Dallas Mavericks (2000), is a compelling figure because of the extent to which images drawn from white lore about Black men seem to cluster around him.[111] In the final section of this chapter, I discuss the ways that

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[110] According to a *USA TODAY* article, the advertising campaign "earned higher-than-average popularity and effectiveness scores when measured for Ad Track, *USA TODAY's* consumer poll of national ads. It was particularly popular among young adults 18-24: 45% said they liked the ads 'a lot.' Of that same group, 43% of them also said they believed the campaign was effective" (Wells).

[111] Dan Bickley, author of an unauthorized biography of Rodman, refers to him as a "prisoner to impulsive behavior" (xiii). Bickley also claims that Rodman is driven by a "nocturnal rage" which

representations of Rodman "gerrymander" within the lore cycle that scripts narratives of containment for Black men. I discuss Rodman's appearance on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* and *GQ* in relation to the discourses of miscegenation, rape, and black male sexual excess and as examples of the ways that his eccentricities make him a useful point of focus in discussions about the processes through which normative configurations of black masculinity are represented, recuperated, and sometimes rejected. I close by suggesting that, as a figure of "cultural gerrymandering," Rodman causes the lines of racial taboo to be drawn and redrawn within white lore cycles in ways that perpetuate the nervous condition that characterizes white America's relationship to African American men (Lhamon 79).

Whatever else one can say about Rodman, the one thing that is certain is his unique ability to make people squirm. He addressed that ability between segments of the made-for-t.v. movie "Bad as I Wanna Be: The Story of Dennis Rodman," which ABC aired on February 8, 1998, when he asked the t.v. audience, "do I make you nervous?" The answer, of course, is yes—during the heyday of his career in the NBA Rodman made a lot of folks nervous. He forced into public view an image of a Black man who in many respects, though certainly not all, did not conform to the images of the disciplined athlete, of a criminal, or of a gentrified, domesticated, and politically neutered Blac[illegible]an. He was notorious for refusing to adhere to rules both on and off the court. In on-court settings he was frequently disciplined for missing or showing up late for practices, and was criticized for avoiding team huddles and for removing

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gives rise to an "uncontrollable temper . . . that surfaces in tremors, always leading to the inevitable quake that tears down the walls" and exposes the "sandbox of hedonism" in which he thrives (xi, xii). The images and stereotypes that Dan Bickley uses to characterize his subject invoke the familiar

his shoes during games (Boyd "Am I Black Enough" 122). His refusal to obey even the most basic rules for NBA team members, combined with his occasionally angry outbursts toward people in and around the court during games, fanned the flames of public fears about the sorts of rules for which he might harbor similar disregard in off-court settings. Ironically, the rules of which he was most frequently in violation in off-court settings had no relationship to actual acts of violence or criminality of any kind. Rather, in off-court settings the social rules with which his image became so imbricated were those that circumscribe the black masculine subject through lore.

Lindon Barrett, in his essay "Black Men in the Mix: Badboys, Heroes, Sequins, and Dennis Rodman," questions the extent to which the notion of the individual is valuable as a lens through which to assess, and to understand, the "potent conjunction of racial, commercial, gendered, and moral economies" that are so compellingly and conveniently located in Rodman's figure. Rather, Barrett proposes, Rodman's transgressions, eccentricities, and inconsistencies are more usefully examined, not as unique to Rodman as an individual, but as characteristic of the fractures, contradictions, and historical continuities that characterize post-civil rights U.S. culture. Barrett claims that these "peculiarities" of U.S. culture wreak havoc on the coherence of Rodman's representations of himself, and on others' representations of Rodman, which are more productively examined in the context of a broader cultural narrative (106). With this in mind, I discuss representations of Rodman in the context of the white lore cycle, which configures and reconfigures white America's methods of preserving and negotiating changes in the shorthand

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stereotype of the Black male as a 'beast' driven to commit acts of destruction by uncontrollable corporeal impulses.

forms through which it articulates its mythologies, fascination, and fear concerning Black masculinity.

Representations of Rodman were, more often than not, situated contentiously in relation to more disciplined images and cultural roles of other Black male athletes. Rodman's multi-colored hair, tattoos, nose rings, painted fingernails, and his passion for cross-dressing were strikingly at odds with the carefully tailored image of Michael Jordan, for example, who epitomizes the image of a Black man with which white America is most comfortable identifying. Rodman's chameleon-like construction (or destruction) of his black athletic body disrupts the celebration of beautiful bodies in sport and re(con)texualizes it as something other than "an active hegemonic agent," interpellated by sport's "ideological celebration of physical labor in capitalism" (Fiske *Understanding* 97-98). Rodman, in *Bad as I Wanna Be* (1996), takes pride in what he claims is his refusal to answer to the hail of the NBA when he writes:

> The NBA didn't make me. They're in the business of taking these young guys who come into the league and marketing the hell out of them until they become stars. . . . They choose the players they think show the NBA in the most positive light . . . *They create the image, then they control the image. But they didn't create me, and they can't control me*. I didn't need the league's help to get where I am. I made it in spite of them. (94, original emphasis)

As an example of his own resistance to the aesthetically demure, apolitical image of the ideal player as configured by the NBA, Rodman calls attention to his appearance on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* in 1995. The cover depicted Rodman seated in a chair upholstered with fabric resembling the skin of a wild cat, wearing leather shorts and a tank top, and holding a parrot on his arm in front of him. The parrot is turned so that it is facing Rodman. Rodman boasts that, with the exception of the swimsuit

edition, the edition of *Sports Illustrated* with his image on the cover sold better than any other that year (*Bad* 94). He reads the volume of magazine sales as a direct affront to efforts on the part of the league to discourage public receptiveness to his image, and as evidence of his successful marketing of an image that he believes to be marked by a liberating form of difference (*Bad* 94).

Rodman fails, however, to recognize the ironies and contradictions to which the success of the cover points, as well as the degree to which the cover plays directly into the same discourses of Black masculinity that compel the NBA's marketing of non-threatening images of the young, mostly Black men in its ranks. Whereas the NBA image celebrates the "sporting [Black] male body" that "offers no categorical challenges to social control," Rodman's image, through its references to an untamable wildness, provides the titillating component of excess that is the necessary partner to the NBA's normative image of the Black male athlete. The parrot seated on Rodman's arm in the picture adds a particularly ironic touch to the picture. Although Rodman reads the parrot as a sign of "exotic" difference written into the photograph's statement of nonconformity, the parrot, a species of bird recognized for its ability to mimic the sounds and words of its keepers, signals the ease with which acts perceived by their agent as resistant can be recuperated in ways that reproduce hegemonic discourses. Rodman's image thus provides the essential second term in the dyad of desire and fear that remains integral to whites' pleasure in the 'game.' The *Sports Illustrated* cover therefore allows Rodman to test the elasticity of his tether, or, in his words, to "color . . . outside the lines," while inscribing a narrative of recuperation

and repetition into his departure from the normative structures built into the moral imaginary of U.S. mass culture (*Bad* 97).[112]

The off-court images of athletes who pose no threat whatsoever to the 'color line' are not exempt from such narrative policing of black masculinity either. Consider the Hanes underwear commercial featuring Michael Jordan who, prior to his retirement from professional basketball and in contrast to Rodman, made only his opponents on the court nervous. The Jordan commercial features two white women sitting on a park bench, speculating about whether passersby are wearing boxers or briefs. An impeccably dressed Michael Jordan approaches. The camera, assuming the gaze of the white women, targets his crotch briefly but shifts quickly upward to his face. The women, and t.v. viewers, recognize Jordan immediately. Jordan, who has figured out what the women are trying to discern, strolls by and comments with an endearing smile, "they're Hanes—let's just leave it at that." The commercial implies that close scrutiny of a male's groin may reveal some evidence as to the style of undergarment that a fellow is wearing and perhaps its contents. The Hanes commercial denies the white women and t.v. viewers the opportunity to scrutinize Jordan so closely. Rather, the camera focuses briefly on Jordan's lower half, clad in not-very-revealing pleated slacks, and then shifts rapidly upwards to his face, effectively denying Jordan's off-court audience the opportunity to gaze upon his crotch for an indiscreet length of time. The camera's strategic shift, together with Jordan's comment, imposes a safe distance between Jordan, whom the camera

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[112] As Barrett puts it, "[w]hat Rodman exposes as indispensable to the NBA is its 'struggle over the relations of representation,' and systems of representation and desire, as Judith Butler adeptly demonstrates, mirror one another in a 'strangely necessary' relation" (108).

paradoxically sexualizes as it castrates, and the white women whom he encounters beyond the disciplined boundaries of the basketball arena. The commercial's tentative gesture toward the myth of the Black male rapist is ironic because it briefly releases Jordan from the confines of the sanitized image that inscribes his powerful, masculine, black body with lack. Although Hanes capitalizes on Jordan's athletic black body, attractive features and popular image to sell undergarments, it does so in ways that domesticate and gentrify his far-more aggressive, on-court image.

Rodman's images on the cover and inside the February 1997 edition of *GQ* situate him more daringly beyond white America's normative structures through overt references to taboo crossings of racialized sexual lines. The cover features Rebecca Romijn, a blond, white model, and Rodman. Clad in a barely-there white, string bikini, Romijn poses in front of Rodman who wears a black satin with white trim, bikini-style swimsuit. Romijn assumes an ambiguous position with respect to Rodman. On the one hand, she appears to be fully in control of the Black man who stands behind her—she rests one hand on Rodman's right thigh while the other hand reaches up and back as if to grab his ear.[113] On the other hand, the photo exploits the potential 'danger' that Rodman, big, strong, nearly naked, tantalizingly close, and most importantly Black, signifies to the model specifically and to white women generally.[114] Rodman stands behind the model; one arm is out of sight, the other

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[113] It is interesting to read the proximity of Romijn's hand to Rodman's ear in relation to a newspaper advertisement for the *BMG Marketing Group* that appeared in the *Village Voice* in April, 1998. *BMG*'s ad depicts the back of a Black man's shaven head on which sits a set of headphones. The caption for the ad, which is inscribed across the man's head, reads, "[w]hen you've got them by the ears their hearts and minds will follow." Such subtle images speak to white America's ongoing concern with gaining control of the bodies, hearts, and minds of African Americans.

[114] The cover to which I'm referring appeared on newsstands. Interestingly, *GQ* subscribers received magazines that depicted Rodman poised behind the model, his hands in a no-foul gesture, and the

hangs passively beside him. Except for the slight jut of his hip there is nothing overtly sexual about Rodman's stance. In fact, his bikini-clad groin, but for the slightest hint of a wrinkle or a bulge, is almost entirely hidden behind the model. Although Rodman's penis may be out of sight, the pose ensures that it remains front and center in the mind of the audience.

Whereas the Hanes commercial in which Jordan appears is very conservative in its allusions to and uses of the narrative of the Black male rapist and the black penis, the *GQ* cover draws the cultural function of white lore about Black men into much clearer focus. *GQ* imposes no safe distance between the Black male and the white female model who grace its cover, thus capitalizing on the racialized discourses of white women's desire for Black men and the resultant construction of Black men as threats to white women. However, when it comes to the issues and images featured between the covers, so to speak, *GQ* imposes considerably more distance between Rodman and Romijn. Inside the magazine, Rodman does not appear in any photographs with Romijn in which she models swimsuits. Rather, Romijn, who appears topless in many of the shots, poses in full, frontal contact with only white, male models in the spread entitled "Romijn Dressing" (142-151). The imposition of distance between Rodman and Romijn rescues the white woman from Rodman by returning the cover's suggestion of miscegenation to the realm of the white

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likeness of his hands painted on Romijn's bare breasts. The different covers speak to the editors' cognizance that confronting the general public, in this case non-subscribers, with such an obvious allusion to interracial sex posed a greater risk of negative repercussions than offering it to an already committed audience of regular subscribers. In other words, the editors were unprepared to bank on general audiences' preparedness to respond neutrally, let alone favorably, to the image of a Black man with his hands on a white woman's body.

imagination, leaving intact a normative order of racial and sexual relations.[115] However, *GQ* does not evacuate the threat of Black masculinity from the scene entirely. Indeed, the photos taken of Rodman alone that accompany the article about him inside, depict him wearing a very small, hot pink swimsuit around which he swirls a leopard-spotted robe, teasing the camera by alternately revealing and concealing the evidence that his participation in this and previous off-court projects has most certainly not gentrified, domesticated, or castrated him. Much like the *Sports Illustrated* cover, the *GQ* cover demonstrates how white lore about the Black male and the black penis continues cycling through stages of meaning that mark a continuous process of cultural struggle, negotiated in and around representations of Black men as figures of criminality and sexual excess.[116]

VI

In this chapter I have located contemporary representations of Black male athletes as a stage in the constantly turning cycles of white lore concerning Black men. I have forged connections between the highly structured 'game' in which Black athletes participate today and earlier forms. The consequences for Black men who

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[115] *GQ*'s restoration of racial and sexual order illustrates a pattern that Lindon Barrett refers to when he claims that "market-driven colonizations of desire (and representation)" ultimately "reduce desire in all its material, imaginary, and symbolic manifestations to a narrow set of calculable, idealized civilities and affabilities ultimately resolving themselves in 'the heterosexual domestic space . . . as an inviolate sanctum'" (108).

[116] Lhamon states: "Lore cycles perform a mediating function. They keep culture traveling and mutating even while they monitor the positional relationships in the originally textualized scenes. Once a taboo line is fixed and challenged, the lore cycle that accrues around it may move the line back and forth, accepting or proscribing behavior; or, the allowable play along the line itself may broaden or attenuate. But its own inertia tends also to maintain the line. Lore cycles exist to draw and redraw the line. A lore cycle gives itself power by moving the line slightly. This is cultural gerrymandering, and it is quite political. There are exact illustrations of this in minstrelsy, which has repeated motifs of *walking the line*, reinforcing the image with such vivid vernacular as 'walk chalk' and 'walk jawbone'" (79, original emphasis).

have lost the 'game' have, at times, been unspeakably dire. For others, such as the athletes whom I discuss in this chapter, it has been possible to transform 'game' forums into profitable venues in which many performances have proven translucent enough to be entertaining for both sides and opaque enough to protect and sustain the spirits and lives of the Black players themselves. Others, such as Rodman and Sprewell, have found themselves ostracized within the forums in which they perform or exiled to other forums by those with a vested interest in protecting the 'game' in both letter and spirit. It is fortunate, for their own sake, that African America men have played the 'game' for so long and so well that the skills they acquire on and in various courts and arenas transfer fairly easily to the many settings in which they find themselves forced players. As we shall see in my final chapter, some of the most complex moves develop and are enacted in front of some of the smallest audiences, in some of the least visible settings, in some of the most unlikely ways, and with some of the least-expected outcomes. It is to these less-visible sites that I turn now in order to discuss some of the tactics that many Black men have employed and dreamt of employing as they play the 'game' while going about their otherwise 'ordinary' lives.

Chapter Four

Getting Over, Making Do: Storytelling, Memory, and the Dailiness of Black Men's Survival

How long a man got to be a man fore they leave him be?
-John Edgar Wideman *Reuben*

I

Johnson and McCuskery, in their introduction to *Black Men Speaking* (1997), cite a body of alarming statistics about Black males' experiences with the criminal justice system in the United States similar to those that I rehearsed in the introduction to this dissertation. They caution, however, against getting so caught up in studying statistics that we forget that real people are living and dying while statisticians crunch their numbers.[117] To Johnson and McCuskery it is equally important that cultural critics direct our attention to "the real miracle—the hidden story in the statistics . . . the way that hope is kept alive in the various corners of the African American community" (xvi). As Johnson and McCuskery put it, "the true and complex stories" of private, undocumented survival strategies "must be told and retold" (xix). So as to discover such hidden stories, they propose that we concern ourselves with the ways that African American men develop and sustain a sense of their community and their

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[117] Johnson and McCuskery echo Certeau's point that "[s]tatistics can tell us virtually nothing about the currents in this sea theoretically governed by the institutional frameworks that it in fact gradually erodes and displaces. . . . The strength of these computations lies in their ability to divide, but this analytical ability eliminates the possibility of representing the tactical trajectories which, according to their own criteria, select fragments taken from the vast ensembles of production in order to compose new stories with them" (35). On the other side of the coin, Ralph Ellison, in "The World and the Jug," argues that "the basic unity of human experience that assures us of some possibility of empathic and symbolic identification with those of other backgrounds is blasted in the interest of specious political and philosophical conceits. Prefabricated Negroes are sketched on sheets of paper and superimposed on the Negro community; then when someone thrusts his head through the page and yells, 'Watch out there, Jack, there're people living under here,' they are shocked and indignant. I am afraid . . . that we shall hear much more of such protest as these impositions continue. . . . And I predict [that] . . . many of those who make so lightly with our image shall find their own subjected to a most devastating scrutiny" (123-124).

views of themselves and each other. Such a search is complicated, however, by the fact that the perspectives and activities out of which survival strategies grow often take place in invisible spaces, thus decreasing the likelihood that they will be "recorded or expressed in institutional ways" (xvii).

As is the case in each of the preceding chapters, my concern is to better understand the dynamic of containment and resistance as it shapes African American men's lives. In this chapter, I turn to fiction about Black male characters who seek to better understand their lives and their relationships to and interactions with whites. I argue that fiction written by and about African American men exposes and challenges the uni-dimensional image of the Black male that has emerged over the course of the twentieth century, and the various methodologies that sustain that image. I draw on short stories and novels by John Edgar Wideman, Richard Wright, and Ernest Gaines to discuss how storytelling and memory function in their work to make available to us tales of survival and resistance. Such tales shape what Michel de Certeau calls an art of 'making do' and what Geneva Smitherman calls 'gittin ovuh.'[118] I conclude by

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[118] The use of such tactics constitutes ways of making do within systems like the Panopticon-like organization of the United States that depend on subjects' perpetual visibility. Certeau uses the term 'making do' to refer to the tactics that people employ in order to move "within the enemy's field of vision . . . and within enemy territory" (29, 37). Certeau also notes that 'making do' does not entail conquering an enemy's territory. Rather, it involves poaching and creating surprises in "the cracks [that] the particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers" (37). These tactics constitute examples of 'making do' because they occur in the blind spots that the system both creates and fails to recognize within its own field of surveillance. Geneva Smitherman, in *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (1977) explains 'getting over' as follows: "Both in the old-time black Gospel song and in black street vernacular, 'gittin ovuh' has to do with surviving. While the religious usage of the phrase speaks to material survival in a sinister world of sin, its secular usage speaks to a material survival in a white world of oppression. Since men and women live neither by bread nor spirit alone, both vitally necessary acts of gittin ovuh challenge the human spirit to 'keep on pushin' toward 'higher ground.' In Black America, the oral tradition has served as a fundamental vehicle for gittin ovuh. That tradition preserves the Afro-American heritage and reflects the collective spirit of the race. Through song, story, folk sayings, and rich verbal interplay among everyday people, lessons and precepts about life and survival are handed down from generation to generation" (73). I use the terms 'making do' and 'getting over' interchangeably throughout this chapter.

suggesting that what we can learn from fictional texts about how African American males 'make do' and 'get over' in their everyday lives has the potential to inform a more complex understanding of the gap between the ways that Black men and whites understand their relationships to each other.

Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), contends that "[e]very society always manifests somewhere the formal rules which its practices obey" (21-22). In Western society, he claims, there are three places where such rules manifest themselves: the specific games of each society and people's accounts of the ways in which those games are played; tales and legends which recount moves, rather than truths, and "reverse the relationships of power, and, like the stories of miracles, ensure the victory of the unfortunate in a fabulous, utopian space" (23); and the "stylistic effects" of the tales themselves (22-23). In essence, Certeau suggests that society manifests the rules governing its practices in the various performances and narratives that give rise to its cultures. Whether we are referring to the use of vernacular languages to develop theories of containment and resistance, the development of a musical genre that allows artists to air grievances about, while they capitalize on, racial tensions and related social problems, the use of the body as a surface on which to etch resistance, or the display of superior skills in the sports arena, such sites both render legible and challenge the rules according to which the United States operates and on which its racial hierarchies rely. I maintain that fiction written by and about African American males functions similarly as a site of memory in which we learn of the tactics that Black men have employed and dreamt of employing as they maneuver their ways through the dailiness of their lives.

Alice Walker's well-known essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," led me to include fiction as the fourth realm of representation on which this dissertation focuses.[119] In that essay, Walker eloquently situates past events and lives already lived in relation to contemporary Black women's writing. Walker expresses regret that images of Black women as "mule[s] of the world" have overshadowed the lingering signs of their resilience (232). She disputes suggestions that the harshness of African American women's lives extinguished their "spirituality—which is the basis of Art" (233). Although Walker admits that few Black women were able to express their spirituality in the forms with which we tend to associate artistic expression today, she is convinced that Black women found ways to keep their creativity "alive, year after year and century after century" (234). The key to discovering evidence of such creativity lies in believing that, although "contrary instincts"—those produced by the many methods of discipline, control and abuse characteristic of slavery—may have muffled the voices of poets and suppressed other forms of artistic expression, those instincts did not negate "the living creativity *some* of our grandmothers were not allowed to know" (Walker 237, original emphasis). That is, Walker argues, others "knew, even without 'knowing' it, the reality of their spirituality, even if they didn't recognize it beyond what happened in the singing in church—and they never had any intention of giving it up" (237-238). Accordingly, Walker herself embarks on a search of Black women's writing for "the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited, and that

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[119] In "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Walker is concerned exclusively with the discovery and recovery of African American women's artistic endeavors, past and present. Nonetheless, I believe that her attention to writing as a record of survival strategies gives the essay tremendous import with regard to my argument in this chapter.

pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day" (239). She also encourages others to undertake critical searches for evidence of the creativity "to which history has seemingly denied us access" because not only physical bodies, but also fictional narratives connect present lives to those past, traversing space and time via forms that free the ancestral voices of those who are only now free to speak.

Many of those ancestral voices are free to speak because they have been reincarnated as characters in fictional narratives. Toni Morrison, in her essay "Memory, Creation, and Writing," posits a compelling relationship between fiction and memory when she remarks that the job of the writer "is not to reveal an already established reality (literary or historical) that [the reader] and [the writer] agree on before hand" (388). Rather, she contends, the job of the writer is to represent information that has been discredited because it was "held by discredited people, information dismissed as 'lore' or 'gossip' or 'magic' or 'sentiment'" (388). In contrast to research, which Morrison characterizes as work that attempts "to find out the way it really was," fiction functions as a site of memory in which both writers and readers "dwell on the way [things] appeared and why [things] appeared in that particular way" (385).[120] In fiction, writers knit pieces and fragments of the past and of the lives of the people who lived there into stories that bear witness to, as they identify, "that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded"

[120] Morrison defines memory as a "deliberate act of remembering" and "a form of willed creation" (385). She alludes to the limitations of research, which she juxtaposes with memory, in ways that are in keeping with Pierre Nora's sense of history as "the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer" (Nora 285). Although I do not unpack them here, I believe that there are interesting connections between Foucault's concepts of genealogical and effective histories, Nora's understanding of history and memory, and Morrison's distinction between research and memory.

(Morrison "Memory" 389).[121] Morrison claims to particularly relish "the ruse of memory" because it enables her to create characters through whom she comes to know, and to help others to know, "the truth of [her] own cultural sources" (386). As Pierre Nora puts it in "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," whereas history ("research" in Morrison's terms) "has concerned itself with . . . things in themselves and in their immediate reality," sites of memory "are their own referent" and therefore function both as sites "of excess closed upon" themselves, "concentrated in [their] own name, but also forever open to the full range of [their] possible significations" (300). Remembered in fictional forms and places, ancestral voices help us to see, as Johnny Paul in Ernest Gaines' novel *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) puts it, "what the rest don't see," thus encouraging more skeptical approaches to the narratives of history that make us blind to Black men's experiences in the United States (Gaines 88).

African American women's and men's experiences have been, and continue to be, markedly different. This fact should not prevent us from responding to Walker's argument by directing critical focus to places where she did not. In my case, I direct my focus to fiction written by and about Black men so as to glimpse narratives and theories of survival that might otherwise have remained buried had they not found homes in literary texts. In this regard, John Edgar Wideman's invocation of an

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[121] Morrison comments that she is puzzled by the idea of using "real-life" people as the models for fictional characters. She finds it more useful to draw on particular traits or features of people whom she remembers only vaguely, rather than on those with whom she is more familiar. As she puts it, "[t]here is no yeast for me in a real-life person, or else there is so much it is not useful—it is done-bread, already baked. The pieces (and only the pieces) are what begin the creative process for me. And the process by which the recollections of these pieces coalesce into a part (and knowing the difference between a piece and a part) is creation. Memory, then, no matter how small the piece remembered, demands my respect, my attention, and my trust" ("Memory" 386).

African American mother in his short story "All Stories are True" is a model for the ways in which it is possible to respond to Walker's call without undermining her investments.[122] Wideman uses an African American mother to contextualize the ways in which the narrative blurs the lines between fact and fiction, past and present, suffering and survival. Through his depiction of the Black mother figure, Wideman pays homage to the stories that Walker asks us to recall, while gesturing towards the recovery of Black men's stories as well.

The story opens with the narrator observing his mother standing on her porch early in the morning. As he watches his mother from inside the house, the narrator senses that his "mother is not alone on her porch." He 'hears' beneath the peacefulness of the early morning the silent murmuring of street names that narrate the stories of the people whose lives they recall (3).[123] The sounds of the street names envelop the mother and signify the "presence of other souls as palpable as light playing in the edges of her robe" (3-4). Those souls include ancestral figures, members of the mother's immediate family, and the narrator himself who recognizes the "man I have become and those whom I've lost becoming him" in his mother's aura (4). The sounds of the street names produce a medium of suspended time where the 'souls of Black folk' gather to form a caul around the figure of the mother and to share with her the task of nurturing the stories of the Black men and women "who

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[122] "All Stories are True" is the first story in a volume of short stories with the same title.

[123] Wideman reverses the invisibility that characterizes communities like Homewood in the first lines of "All Stories are True" when he describes the more peaceful, middle-class neighborhoods beyond Homewood's boundaries as invisible. He writes: "Early morning and the street is quiet now, as peaceful as it gets here, as peaceful as it always stays in other neighborhoods, invisible, not a half mile away behind the tree-topped ridge that separates Tokay, Susquehanna, Dunfermline, Seagirt from their neighbors to the west" (3).

must never be allowed to slip from the arms" of the ancestors (4). In this story specifically, and throughout his work generally, Wideman blends his voice with the murmuring sounds of the street names to tell the stories of those men and women who, like the centuries-old tree across from the mother's house, "held out against the odds" and survived for reasons and in ways that remain a mystery (5, 4). Just as the mother is supported by an ancestral caul, so too Wideman's stories, like the ancient tree, are moored by a root system out of which "a dark fist" explodes "through the asphalt, thrusting to the sky, the fingers opening, multiplying, fanning outward to form a vast umbrella of foliage" (5). The beauty of Wideman's stories, like those of Wright and Gaines and so many other African American male writers, lies in the ways that they transform common place scenes into narratives that mobilize "the invisible omnipresence of time" and encourage movement between past and present, beginning and end, prison and sanctuary (5).[124] As Walker and Morrison remind us, African American fiction is often haunted by ancestral figures whose presence we sometimes are lucky enough to detect, whose souls form the stuff and substance of fictional writing. Just as Walker had to search for signs of African American women's creativity, their will to survive, and their resistance, so too I undertake similar searches in the narratives of African American male writers and in the textual

[124] Toni Morrison's sense of what makes the novel so important to African Americans living in our contemporary moment informs my use of the word 'beauty' to describe the writing that is the focus of this chapter. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison writes of fictional writing: "It should be beautiful, and powerful, but it should also *work*. It should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe." (341) In my view, writing that works in the ways that Morrison describes is beauty incarnate.

lives of their characters. For I am also convinced that in fiction, as in the biological lives of African American men, the signatures of the ancestors are made clear.

II

As I discussed in Chapter One, African American men in the United States are subject to technologies of containment that resemble those of the Panopticon. Craig Smith, in his essay "Darkness Visible: The Politics of Being Seen from Ellison to Zebrahead," uses the term "visuality" to describe the contemporary state of hypervisibility that such technologies produce and in which African American males are caught. [125] Smith contrasts the increasing visuality of African American males with the invisibility on which Ralph Ellison focused more than half a century ago in *Invisible Man*. As Smith sees it, the invisibility that Ellison addresses in the opening lines of and throughout his novel "no longer defines—through negation—large sections of the African-American population" (2). Rather, he contends, "[i]nvisibility has evolved into an equally deformative, equally symptomatic visibility which is constructed, still, in order to control and contain the discomforting difference of America—to manage, that is, what Eric Lott has called the American 'racial unconscious'" (2).[126] Smith defines the visuality that he claims characterizes more recent approaches to containing African American males as a "social practice that enables American racialism, the system of organizing human possibilities and limits,

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[125] Smith uses the term "black male" rather than Black man throughout his article. He does so "to suggest some of the dehistoricized, undifferentiated typicality that invests this figure, and to point to its masculinity, of course overdetermined yet presented implicitly as a genetically coded species-inheritance that takes over in specific circumstances, namely the kinds of breakdown which are believed to occur (which must, it is believed, occur) in 'the inner city'!" (3).

[126] Lott defines the American 'racial unconscious' as "a structured formation, combining thought and feeling, tone and impulse, and at the very edge of semantic availability, whose symptoms and anxieties make it just legible" (Lott 33).

character and essence according to a hierarchical scheme of racial value knowable, readable, discernible in the epidermally visible" (3). That is, visuality shapes what Smith calls "structures of containment," by organizing the ways in which Black males are seen "within strictly delineated categories, . . . within a frame which appears to offer compensatory interest after centuries of aversion, but which, in effect, performs a coercive act of ideological re-negation" (3). Whereas visuality produces an image of Black masculinity as pathological, "innately violent, aggressively sexual, loudly inarticulate, aggrieved, and resentful," the institutional state apparatuses that produce it also allow "so-called model minorities and the black middle class" to coexist with "neoconservatives and postliberals" in what might best be termed a probationary manner (3). The guise of such inclusiveness distracts us from the role that visuality plays in perpetuating the containment of African American males and thereby obscures the oppressive project.

John Fiske approaches the visuality to which African American males are subject from a different perspective. Like Smith, Fiske is concerned with the extent to which signifiers of evil, danger, and disorder have become jumbled into a singular image of Black masculinity. The construction of this singular image structures a system of containment in which "the Black man is he who must be seen" (Fiske "Surveilling" 2).[127] An extensive and ever-expanding network of surveillance ensures the visuality of the Black male, thus shrinking the terrain of the private and limiting

[127] Fiske identifies surveillance as a perfect example of a disciplinary technology used in ways motivated by racism that cannot be otherwise articulated in a society that purports to be democratic. Noting the increase in surveillance in the US generally, Fiske calls attention to the seamless manner in which surveillance systems target primarily Black males ("Surveilling" 5).

the pods of invisibility in which it is possible to escape the containment wrought by the Panoptic gaze (Fiske "Surveilling" 3). In the United States, for instance,

> [s]urveillance priority is granted to commercial districts, sites of public recreation and upscale residential areas, that is, to areas where whites conduct their business and their recreation, so its effect is to further ghettoize the city into zones of safety, order and whiteness and into dark zones that can be unseen, uncared for and ignored. The problem is not policing these zones but containing them, and surveillance is a mechanism not only of knowledge, but of containment. (Fiske "Surveilling" 6-7)[128]

Surveillance, in other words, produces both invisibility and hypervisibility. Unsurveilled sites do the work of containing African American males whose lives and activities are, for various reasons, cast into the category of "the unseeable, the unknowable and the unthinkable" (Fiske "Surveilling" 8). An ironic component of the compartmentalization to which Fiske refers is the production of ghettoized sites over which surveillance is deemed unnecessary. The irony is that these sites offer contained subjects a degree of anonymity and invisibility that does not exist beyond the parameters of the sites. Fiske explains the ambiguous nature of these invisible spaces as follows:

> The private, or at least the not-public, is a double-sided space: besides being the realm that those who inhabit it can defend against surveillance, it is also the realm where what is deemed unsuitable for public knowledge can be contained and hidden. The private can be a technology of containment as well as a zone of freedom, a ghetto as well as an enclave. The difference between the two is a difference of control over what, or who, is inside and over who has the right to cross the boundary between inside and outside. ("Surveilling" 12)

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[128] The degree to which surveillance technologies are underscored, indeed driven, by racist motives is easily overlooked by those who assume that "all citizens benefit from increasing public safety, [and] enhancing public order" ("Surveilling" 5). The pressure to deny that the desire for a crime-free, orderly environment is motivated by racist assumptions is increased by the delusions and assumptions that enable a malevolent, carefully disguised network of racism to dwell comfortably in the architecture of democratic societies.

These invisible sectors are seldom recognized or accounted for within more visible quarters. The tactics of survival and resistance that occur within are also seldom, if ever, acknowledged. Accordingly, African American males inside ghettoized loci claim an important form of social power that is "the power not to be seen, or at least the power to control which of its doings are to be made visible" (Fiske "Surveilling" 11).[129] Therefore, the potential exists for Black men to exploit the oppressive conditions that produce the 'privacy' of invisible loci. Such loci produce conditions in which African American males can take advantage of the power that comes with 'privacy' so as to "reverse the power of seeing and knowing," through actions that bring about momentary reversals and resistances (Fiske "Surveilling" 13). Although the invisible sites continue to function as sites of containment, they are also places in which it is possible to experience some degree of freedom.

In this chapter, I discuss how and why fictional characters 'make do' within the blind spots to which Fiske calls our attention. The characters on whom I focus my attention are neither part of the Black middle-class to which white America points as

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[129] As I argued in Chapter One, the powers "not to be seen" and/or to control which actions are visible, are not necessarily at odds with the Panoptic model of containment. Just as the two-windows in each cell in a Panopticon compromise the clarity with which a prisoner can be seen and the ability to determine the precise nature of his actions, so too is the case in the "not public" spaces to which Fiske refers. Those inside the "not public" spaces are freer to act in ways that are not possible in more closely and accurately surveilled spaces. DuBois addresses the irony of such double-sided spaces in his discussion of the veil. DuBois uses the notion of the veil to conceptualize the peculiar manner in which African Americans are situated in the United States on account of their blackness. On the one hand, he explains, since blackness left him "shut out from [the white] world by a vast veil," it seemed that he would be better off if, rather than trying to tear it down, he learned to live above it "in a region of blue sky and wandering shadows" while holding "all beyond it in common contempt" (8). On the other hand, DuBois acknowledges that, whatever freedom is to be gained by living above a veil that remains in place, does not alter the fact that he remains "an outcast and a stranger in mine own house." Indeed, he suggests that the veil structures a prison for both whites and Blacks when he writes: "The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all: walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above" (8).

evidence of how much things have changed, or part of the prison population on which white America draws to mobilize old and generate new fears of Black men.[130] Rather, they are, for the most part, law-abiding citizens whose days revolve around mostly low-paying jobs, the places that they call home, and often some form of male-centered community, and whose lives fall into a particular pattern of 'respectability.' In short, they fall outside of the categories that white America constructs and relies on both to characterize African American males and to contain them in literal and ideological cages. Invisible though they might be within certain circles, these characters are not invisible to themselves or to other Black males with whom they have contact. They are well aware of and concerned about how they are seen and situated in relation to white Americans and other African Americans. They share a unique sense of themselves as political beings in a world that does not see them as such, or at all.[131] Their personal acts of resistance rarely, if ever, translate into visible, profitable or effective political acts. In many respects, then, their resistance is often as invisible as they are. Yet their resistance matters. This chapter explores how and what acts of resistance or 'making do' mean to African American males and why those acts ought to matter to the rest of us as well.

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[130] There is one exception. Wally, who is a key figure in Wideman's novel *Reuben*, is a university professor who recruits basketball players for the college team. Although the narrator of Wideman's story "Ascent by Balloon from the Yard of Walnut Street Jail" is literally in prison, I believe that Wideman uses that character to explore the notion of containment in a more abstract sense.

[131] Michael Eric Dyson has aptly characterized such figures as 'invisible men' because their lives and experiences so frequently exist on the "periphery of scholarly and cultural awareness" (*Reflecting Black* 206). Indeed, the lives and experiences of African American men who fit into such categories are remarkably undocumented except by writers of fiction and autobiography. A notable exception is Mitchell Duneier's ethnographical study *Slim's Table: Race, Respectability, and Masculinity* (1992), which takes a close look at the lives and worldviews of a group of working-class, elderly Black men who meet regularly at a cafeteria in Chicago. In *Slim's Table*, Duneier asks similar questions to those that inform my readings of the fictional texts on which I focus in this chapter.

III

Wideman's short story "Ascent by Balloon from the Yard of Walnut Street Jail" (1995) addresses the importance of double vision with respect to the ways that Black men understand their own containment. The story is set in 1793 in Philadelphia's Walnut Street Jail, which was built in 1790 and modeled on the Panopticon. The story's first-person narrator is an inmate in the jail. In the opening paragraphs of the story, the narrator claims to have been the first of the "African race in space" because he took part in the first aerial voyage by hydrogen balloon in the United States (*Defense* 252). The narrator credits his involvement in this event with his transformation from a convict, "one of those unfortunates who must wear a black hood and speak not, nor be spoken to," to a celebrity, "an overnight sensation" (*Defense* 252). As a celebrity, he receives numerous accolades and commendations, offers for the story of his life, and even a request that he run for public office (*Defense* 252). In light of the narrator's description, it seems odd that neither his name nor even his participation is mentioned in the fictional article about the ascent published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* to which he calls attention:

> *On January 19, 1793 Jean-Pierre Blanchard, French aeronaut, ascended in his hydrogen balloon from the yard of Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia to make the first aerial voyage in the United States. In the air forty-six minutes, the balloon landed near Woodbury, New Jersey and returned the same evening to the city in time for Citizen Blanchard to pay his respects to President Washington, who had witnessed the ascension in the morning.* (*Defense* 252, original emphasis)

The narrator explains that, "I was on board the balloon because little was understood about the effect of great height upon the human heart. . . . I was the Frenchman's crew. Aboard to keep the gondola neat and sanitary, a passenger so my body could

register danger as we rose into those uncharted regions nearer my God to thee" (*Defense* 252). The narrator's revelation that his role was that of scientific guinea pig and servant explains why his name was elided from the public record of the event. The newspaper's elision of the narrator's involvement in the event and his explanation of his role undermine his image as a celebrity, rendering him and his important role invisible to others.

The narrator eventually reveals that he had not, in fact, been on the balloon during its ascension. Rather, he had merely been imagining what it would be like to be so visible and rise "to a heretofore undreamed-of height for any person of my race" (*Defense* 255). He believes it to be a miracle that he even saw the ascending balloon given that he is allotted only ninety seconds each day to "cross the prison yard, grab tools, supplies" before returning to his cell (*Defense* 255). Further, he notes, "[o]bserved from the height of the balloon I'd be just another ant. Not even my black hood pierced with crude eyeholes would distinguish me as I emerged from the night of my cell, blinking back the sudden onslaught of crisp January sunlight" (*Defense* 256). The narrator integrates the chance moment of 'freedom' that he experiences by focusing his gaze upward with his imagined view of himself from the balloon. The narrator's ability and desire to view both his environment and himself from two perspectives violates the rules of a structure designed to prevent inmates from imagining roles for themselves outside their cells. Noting the irony and potential of the multiple worldviews to which he has discovered access, the narrator states:

> If Citizen Blanchard's historic flight had commenced a few seconds sooner or later, I would have missed it. Imagine. I could have lived a different life. Instead of being outdoors glancing up at the heavens, I might have been in my cell pounding on the intractable leather they

> apportion me for cobbling my ten pairs of shoes a week. In that solitary darkness tap-tap tapping, I wouldn't have seen the striped floating sphere come to fetch me and carry me home. (*Defense* 255)

On the one hand, Wideman invokes images of slave ships and the bars of the United States penitentiaries via references to the balloon's "boat-shaped" basket, its striped pattern, and "red, white and blue bunting" (*Defense* 255). On the other hand, although the material circumstances of the narrator's life do not change, the narrator reimagines the balloon as a sign, "hovering motionless, waiting for someone it seemed, a giant, untethered fist thrust triumphantly at the sky" (*Defense* 256).[132] By reimagining the balloon's significance, he claims the agency typically denied to those who do not or cannot recognize or embrace the possibilities inherent in double vision and invisible spaces.[133]

Wideman employs the fictional incident to invoke an entire history in which Black people have been denied the status of a name and forced into servitude. In this way, Wideman sets about doing what the narrator calls "unraveling [the] modern instant" (*Defense* 254). Wideman does so by disrupting notions of time as linear and

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[132] Wideman's imagery of the Black fist thrusting upward recalls Tommy Smith and John Carlos giving the Black power salute on the medal podium at the Mexico City Olympics in 1968. Though certainly not the first time the fist was used as a sign of Black power, they rendered the salute highly visible to the consternation of white Americans, who reacted with horror and anger.

[133] The narrator's aerial view resembles that which DuBois associates with one who lives above the veil "in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows" (8). The narrator makes use of what DuBois refers to as the gift of "second-sight" which enables African Americans to "see [themselves] through the revelation of the other world," a point of view that makes it seem both possible and impossible for a Black man to be "both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (8). Wideman's notion that a "striped floating sphere," an image of both containment and transcendence itself, can guide subjects to a "home" is integral to the relationship that he imagines between containment and resistance. The combined effect of the height of the balloon and its shadow produces conditions of animosity and invisibility for the inmates in the prison yard below when the shadow of the balloon "eclipse[s] a corner of the [prison] yard, then scuttle[s] spider-like up the far wall of the Walnut Street Jail" (255). The sites that the balloon's shadow eclipses represent invisible sites of the sort that Fiske refers to as sites of containment as well as agency.

progressive. For instance, both the story and the narrator confuse "one time with another" to the extent that "[e]vents lose their shape, slide one into another when the time one is supposed to own becomes another's property" (*Defense* 253). Such confusion is inevitable in sites of containment such as prisons and ghettos, which "steal time, rob time of its possibilities, deaden time to one dull unending present" (*Defense* 253). The notion of stolen time negates the sense of time as something that one has or will be given, and transforms it into something that is "taken away" (*Defense* 253). In this story, Wideman links time to the Black experience. He describes stolen time as "drawn, quartered and eviscerated, a sharp pain hovering over the ghost of an amputated limb" (*Defense* 253). His description invites readers to consider the nature of the "phantom pains" that result when a history is distorted by elisions every bit as violent as the amputation of a limb. These elisions inform and haunt contemporary representations and experiences of African American men, making "the arc of [their lives] emblematic of our fledging nation's destiny, its promise for the poor and oppressed from all corners of the globe" (*Defense* 252). The irony is that, for Black men, the nation promises not freedom and equality, but containment and oppression. On account of this irony, their lives are "emblematic" of the nation's destiny, which is to keep a portion of its citizenry contained. Accordingly, just as the narrator must "execute the task" that earned him an ascent by balloon from Walnut Street jail, so too Wideman must resist the urge to lose himself as a writer "in the splendor of the day" as enjoyed from the liberating perspective of the authorial gaze, and focus instead on employing his work to show others "a [Black] world never seen by human eyes" (*Defense* 254). Whereas the narrator's task

is to track his heart rate during the balloon's ascent, Wideman's task is first to hear, and then to find a way to articulate the "heartbreak . . . the sound of ice cracking" which his writing makes visible and legible (Wideman *Brothers and Keepers* 97).[134]

IV

Paul Gilroy claims that Richard Wright's understudied volume of short stories *Eight Men* (1961) offers insight into contemporary representations of, and responses to, Black masculinity and Black masculine performances. He finds particularly relevant Wright's exploration of the ways that both symbolic and material acts of violence mediate racial domination and influence the exercise of racialized power (xv). Noting the "centrality of violent fantasies" to contemporary African American popular culture, Gilroy suggests that there is something to be gained by casting our critical eyes backward to Wright's creative explorations of various forms of compensatory resistance (xiv). Gilroy also calls attention to the astute ways Wright addresses the degree to which "Blacks and whites enjoy radically different forms of consciousness and are sundered from each other even when they occupy the same spaces" (xv).

The importance of seeing things differently, and finding ways to exploit the possibilities and the risks inherent in invisibility, is central to Wright's short story "The Man Who Lived Underground." Gilroy describes Wright's story as a meditation "on the characters and dynamism of black masculinity—enacted, feared, celebrated,

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[134] Morrison, in her essay "The Site of Memory," emphasizes the importance of revealing the world from a Black perspective. Noting the tendency of many authors of slave narratives to "pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, 'But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate," Morrison believes that it is her job as a Black writer to find ways to "rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" and enter into conversations about Black people in which Black were historically not invited to participate (301-302).

worried over, lived, and beheld both by outsiders and initiates" (xiv). Wright theorizes about the different ways that Black men and whites, especially white police officers, see themselves and understand their relationships with one another. The narrator of the story is Fred Daniels, a Black man whose name we do not learn until we are well into the story.[135] Readers meet Daniels in the first lines of the story when he is looking for a place to hide. He has escaped from a police interrogation room where he had been forced to sign a confession stating that he had murdered a white woman (71). He chooses to hide in a sewer system to which he gains access when the torrential rains cause a *man*hole cover—the term is significant—to lift (19). Daniels' entry into the manhole and his journey through the underground system lead him to develop a different perspective of the world aboveground. His new perspective eventually enables him to understand the dynamic of power, fear, and guilt wrought by hegemonic power arrangements and borne by African Americans generally, and African American men specifically. It also allows him to envision options other than hiding from or surrendering to his persecutors. His journey underground thereby

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[135] Although I do not explore it here, the story of Daniel in the lion's den (Daniel 6) appears to be an important intertext to "The Man Who Lived Underground." As the biblical story goes, "Daniel was preferred above the presidents and princes, because an excellent spirit was in him; and the king thought to set him over the whole realm. Then the presidents and princes sought to find occasion against Daniel concerning the kingdom; but they could find none occasion nor fault; forasmuch as he was faithful, neither was there any error or fault found in him." (Daniel 6: 3-4). Those who resent Daniel and the esteem in which the King holds him convince the King that Daniel is disloyal to the kingdom because of his faith in God. On account of there being a law in place forbidding such split loyalties, the King orders that Daniel be put into a lions' den and hopes fervently that Daniel will find a way to save himself. God binds the lions' mouths shut so they cannot eat Daniel and he lives. The King is so grateful that he orders those who had convinced him to put Daniel into the den in the first place to be cast into the den themselves. Thereafter, "Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian" (Daniel 6: 28). Unlike Daniel who survived his sentence in the lions' den without his head ending up in a lions' mouth, Daniels is, in a manner of speaking, not so lucky. Wright seems to suggest that Daniels would have done better to follow the advice of the grandfather in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, who cautions the narrator that "our life is a war" and advises him to "[l]ive with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (16).

enables him to mobilize the double vision that affords him an image of himself as a man and a new understanding of both underground and aboveground worlds.

The story begins when Daniels lowers himself through the manhole into the "watery darkness" of the sewer system and is swept "violently into an ocean of warm, leaping water" (20). Despite his fear that he is dying, his submersion represents an escape from the social death that he had endured in his life aboveground and the beginning of his gestation and rebirth as a man in his own eyes, if not in the eyes of those who control the world aboveground (20). The various tunnels in the underground system lead to portals through which Daniels observes and comes to understand the nature and function of the many ways by which African American people 'get over' in the aboveground world. For instance, through one portal Daniels observes a church sanctuary in which he watches "a segment of black men and women, dressed in white robes, singing, holding tattered songbooks in their black palms" (24).[136] His initial reaction is to stifle an urge to laugh out of a "sense of guilt" and a fear that God might "strike him dead" (24). Although he can think of no reason that the church choir should not sing, he "felt that he was gazing upon something abysmally obscene, yet he could not bring himself to leave" (24). As Daniels continues to observe the singers, he experiences a deep pain "induced by the sight of those black people groveling and begging for something they could never get" (25). The singers' melodic pleas to Jesus to "take me to your home above/And fold me in

[136] Toni Morrison, in her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," claims that the use of a chorus in narrative is significant as a means of allowing "the community or the reader at large" to comment "on the action as it goes ahead" (341).

the bosom of Thy love" seem no less futile to Daniels than were his efforts to make the police officers believe that he had not killed the white woman (25).

When Daniels initially hears the singing he is unable to determine if the sound is a siren, music, or a baby's cry (Wright 23). Houston Baker, in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984), suggests that Daniels' initial reaction to the singers bears the marks of both the guilt and the infantilism imposed on him in the aboveground world, signified by the sounds of a siren and a child (160). He suggests that the "subbasement ceremonial context gives [the singing] the character of a basic, or primordial, social action in the mediation of guilt. It is, in effect, 'primitive' religion designed to 'socialize' guilt" (160). Although Daniels' initial reaction to the singers coheres with Baker's reading, I think that Daniels' subsequent reactions to the singing suggest that, rather than merely "socializing" guilt, the singing may in fact structure a forum of "acquittal," so to speak, for the singers themselves. Although Daniels is not at first certain of the nature of the sound, he is not oblivious to the possibility that it is the sound of music. Nor, when he determines this to be so, is he oblivious to the possibility that the singing might mean something to the singers beyond what he is able to imagine in his current state of mind. Daniels' observations of the singers lead him to suspect that their singing is as much a journey to a safe space as is his descent into the manhole (Wright 25). The notion that people could sing "with the air of the sewer blowing in on them" is therefore both intriguing and distressing to him (Wright 24). As long as the singers continue to sing and pray they are refusing to surrender the hopes and dreams that compel them to sing in the first place. In contrast to Daniels, who "had run away from

the police, had pleaded with them to believe in *his* innocence," the singers do not run but rather "stand unrepentant and yield no quarter in singing and praying" (Wright 25, original emphasis). Although Daniels admires the fortitude of the church singers, he does not understand where it comes from. Because his efforts to convince the police of his innocence were futile, he imagines the singers' aspirations to be similarly so. Daniels' mixed reactions to the singers, then, stem from his lack of understanding as to the nature of his flight to safety, and his uncertainty as to how to go about transforming his underground space into a similarly safe refuge and acquitting himself. It is therefore not surprising that Daniels sees himself mirrored in the visage of a dead baby whom he discovers upon leaving the vantage point from which he views the people singing in church. The baby's "eyes were closed, as though in sleep; the fists were clenched, as though in protest; and the mouth gaped in a soundless cry" (26). Just as the infant's body registers the signs of thwarted protest, so too Daniels' mind registers an image of himself as a deformed, blackened aberration, something-less-than-a man.

Daniels' journeys through the underground tunnels lead him to a psychic place from which he develops a "radically revisionist comprehension of aboveground existence" and where he learns to see himself as a man (Baker 160). Baker characterizes Daniels' unique angle of vision as a "threshold perspective," characteristic of one who transgresses boundaries so as to "secure a distinctive outsider's point of view" (160). Daniels negotiates the invisible terrain of the underground world, which affords him the perspective of an "unseen seer," and enables him to recognize the absurdities and contradictions of life in the aboveground

world (Baker 160). Daniels' observations of an audience of Black people seated in the reserved section of a movie theater lead to his understanding of the extent to which he had heretofore allowed those absurdities and contradictions to determine his view of himself as something less than a man (Wright 29-30). In the theater, as in the church, he hears a chorus of voices and is initially unable to discern whether they are "joyous or despairing" (29). When he realizes that the voices are in fact joyous, he again suppresses an impulse to tell the crowd to stop laughing. He is disgusted that the people in the theater "were laughing at their lives . . . shouting and yelling at the animated shadows of themselves" (30). Although he resists the urge to alert the crowd to the error of their ways, he leaves the theater believing that the patrons had somehow been tricked as easily as children into a zombie-like state where they were "sleeping in their living, awake in their dying" (30).

Once again, Daniels is forced to confront his image of himself as 'not-a-man' when he leaves the theater and "a man in a blue uniform," who refers to him as "Sir," offers him directions to the men's room (30). Wright does not specify whether the man in the blue uniform is Black or white. That he calls Daniels "Sir" and works as an usher in a segregated theater, however, suggests that he is Black. Daniels is startled that the man in the blue uniform even notices him, so "used had he become to being underground that he thought that he could walk past the man, as though he were a ghost" (30). Daniels also finds it comical that the man in blue would point him towards such an unlikely destination as a *men's* room. Rather than taking advantage of the opportunity to enter and to use a space reserved exclusively for men, a category from which Daniels, as a Black male, has come to accept his exclusion, he bathes,

drinks and urinates in a furnace room (31). As he finishes his business, the white man who tends the furnace enters the room. While Daniel hides in the coal bin, the man, whose face is "lined with coal dust," loads coal into the furnace without bothering to turn on a light in the dim room (31). Daniels is impressed by the confidence with which the white man, whom Wright represents as a minstrel-like figure, performs his duties in the darkness. As Daniels watches him, he realizes that the old man "had no need for light" because "he had learned a way of seeing in his dark world, like those sightless worms that inch along underground by a sense of touch" (32). Wright juxtaposes Daniels' disgust that the Black theater patrons find reason to laugh at filmic representations of themselves, with his admiration for the certainty with which the white man in Blackface negotiates the blackness of the furnace room. In the end, it becomes apparent to Daniels that his disgust is misplaced and that the joke is on the white man. He begins to grasp that, like whites who perform in Blackface, he too has been completely taken in by illusions about Black men. This accounts for his failure to consider that the patrons' laughter may be what Ralph Ellison referred to as "a profound rejection of the image created to usurp [their] identity" ("Change the Joke" 55). Whereas the Black patrons laugh because they recognize the gap between what Ellison calls "the shadow and the act," both Daniels' and the minstrel man's blindness with respect to the authenticity of their own roles results from their failure to differentiate between shadow and act.

In his essay "The Shadow and the Act" (1949), Ellison cautions against confusing the portrayal of African Americans in Hollywood films with the real actions that give rise to such representations (276). As he puts it: "In the beginning

was not the shadow, but the act, and the province of Hollywood is not action, but illusion. Actually, the anti-Negro images of the films were (and are) acceptable because of the existence throughout the United States of an audience obsessed with an inner psychological need to view Negroes as less than men" ("The Shadow and the Act" 276). Ellison's essay, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" (1958) also offers insight into the sorts of contradictions with which Daniels wrestles as he makes his way through the theater. What Daniels fails to grasp is what Ellison calls "the joke at the center of the American identity" (54). Half of the joke arises from the "white man's half-conscious awareness that his image of the Negro is false [which] makes him suspect the Negro of always seeking to take him in, and assume his motives are anger and fear—which very often they are" (55). The other half of the joke arises because African Americans find it amusing that whites "can be so absurdly self-deluded over the true interrelatedness of blackness and whiteness" and therefore view whites as hypocrites who boast of having a "pure identity while standing with [their] humanity exposed to the world" (55). The laughter and joy that Daniels finds so bewildering are part of a complex system of masking that arises as a response to the joke that Ellison identifies.

Daniels eventually understands that his flight underground was compelled not by cowardice, but rather by an absurd form of guilt wrought by the police officers' refusal to believe that he did not kill the white woman. As Daniels puts it:

> He was now in possession of the feeling that had gripped him when he had first come into the underground. It came to him in a series of questions: Why was this sense of guilt so seemingly innate; so easy to come by, to think, to feel, so verily physical? It seemed that when one felt this guilt one was retracing in one's feelings a faint pattern designed long before; it seemed that one was always trying to

> remember a gigantic shock that had left a haunting impression on one's body which one could not forget or shake off, but which had been forgotten by the conscious mind, creating in one's life a state of eternal anxiety. (60)

His recognition that white society burdens African Americans with a constant, and at times overpowering, sense of guilt alters the way that he understands the underground world and its relationship to the world aboveground. Daniels sets about learning to negotiate his underground terrain as dexterously as the white caretaker in the furnace room negotiates the blackness of that space. Daniels makes the underground world more habitable by using items that he has stolen from various aboveground locations in unintended ways, and viewing his stash of stolen items as a "mocking symbol" that he constructs "between him and the world that had branded him guilty" (54). As he concludes, "if the world as men had made it was right, then anything else was right, any act a man took to satisfy himself, murder, theft, torture" (56). Daniels' imposition of a boundary of his own making between himself and the aboveground world marks his movement away from "a passive and guilty subjugation" toward a place where he sees himself as a man who functions, albeit in limited ways, as an "agent of his own destiny" (Baker 158, 163). His agency derives from his sense that, since Black men have to get over by going underground, they might as well exploit what the aboveground world lacks—equity, fairness, logic—to their own advantage.

At the end of the story, Daniels finds himself in a position similar to that of the protagonist at the end of Ellison's *Invisible Man* who states: "Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labeled 'file and forget,' and I can neither file nor forget. Nor will certain ideas forget me; they keep filing away at my lethargy, my complacency" (579). Like Invisible Man, Daniels has been "hurt to the

point of invisibility," and driven to doubt his humanity (Ellison 580). And like Invisible Man, Daniels finds himself in possession of knowledge that he, too, can neither "file nor forget" and which makes him yearn to act in ways that have more of an impact on the world aboveground than a "nameless thing" like a gunshot fired underground (Wright 59). So as to "give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of [the aboveground world's] certainties," Daniels emerges from underground determined to "somehow say something to somebody" about what he has learned about guilt during his descent into "the lyric darkness" (Ellison 581, Wright 60). He returns to the police station hoping to convince the police that their actions were driven by illusory images of Black men, and to offer himself to them as a more authentic image. Daniels is convinced that if all parties retreat from their roles as what Ellison terms "masking jokers," it will be possible to make the world aboveground as habitable as he has learned to make the one below ("Change the Joke" 55). As Daniels sees it, he "was the statement, and since it was all so clear to him, surely he would be able to make it clear to others" (Wright 69). The irony implicit in Daniels' wish is that the officers do see him clearly, so clearly in fact that he seems transparent as they look right through him.

Unfortunately, Daniels ignores the fear that warned "him to stay in his world of dark light" and instead ascends through the manhole. He is determined to share his discovery with others so that they too can see the light that has gone on in his dark world (65). He locates some police officers and attempts to explain his theory to them but is frustrated to discover that the "distance between what he felt and what these men [thought he] meant was vast" (72). So as to "force the reality of himself upon

them," he convinces the officers to follow him to the rim of the manhole. He invites them to descend into the underground world therein so that they might see their relationship to him and to all Black people as he has come to see it (74). Daniels believes that sharing his underground discoveries will guide them collectively to a state of "fellowship" (80). Regrettably, the police officers do not hear what Daniels is trying to tell them and dismiss his theory as "[d]elusions of grandeur" most likely wrought by the fact that "he lives in a white man's world" (80-81). As Daniels descends into the manhole one of the police officers shoots him, leaving him unconscious with his "mouth gap[ing] soundless[ly]" in a manner reminiscent of the dead infant whom he encountered early in his journey underground (83). The officer justifies shooting Daniels on the grounds that, "You've got to shoot his kind. They'd wreck things" (84). The officers are quite correct, as Daniels' intentions are to wreck the way that the aboveground world operates. However, just as the narrator in Wideman's short story "Ascent by Balloon from the Yard of Walnut Street Jail" cannot destroy the walls that contain him, so Daniels' efforts to bring about change in the world aboveground unfortunately prove to be futile. Like the narrator of Wideman's story, though, Daniels realizes that there is agency to be found in the invisible spaces of the underground world, thus making it possible for him to descend into the manhole secure in his belief that he is, indeed, a man.

V

Nearly thirty years after Wright wrote "The Man Who Lived Underground," Wideman published *Reuben*, a complex fictional text that echoes many of the issues that Wright explored. *Reuben* is a compelling, fictional account of how African American men understand and negotiate their places vis-à-vis white America. Like "The Man Who Lived Underground," *Reuben* speaks to the seeming impossibility of Black men's integration into an aboveground world. The novel therefore explores the ways that Black men 'get over' by finding innovative ways of surviving in the invisible loci to which white America effectively exiles them. Whereas Daniels' fatal mistake is his belief that the aboveground world is ready to see him as he sees himself, that is as a man, Wideman's protagonist Reuben holds no such illusions. Reuben, an aged, physically deformed, African American man, takes it upon himself to perform legal "tricks" for the "poor and worse than poor" in Pittsburgh's Homewood ghetto (2). He does so by constructing a series of counter-illusions that allow him to move through the aboveground world as freely as the ghost that Daniels imagines himself to be when he walks through the theater. Reuben, whom the people of Homewood see as always having been there, represents an important ancestral presence in the novel. Reuben's timeless quality makes the people of Homewood receptive to him as a figure of benevolence, protection, and wisdom (Morrison "Rootedness" 343). Like the African god Esu, Reuben's life seems to have no beginning or end, and his function within the community is to mediate and to help his clients interpret the indeterminacy that governs their lives as Black people living in an invisible locus in the United States (Gates *Signifying* 35). In many respects, Reuben

seems to embody time itself, which Yves-Charles Grandjeat, in his essay "Brother Figures: The Rift and Riff in John E. Wideman's Fiction," claims as

> the constitutive element of double consciousness. The brother figure, the one who . . . bridges past and present, memory and consciousness. The one who makes clear that consciousness involves looking at the present through the prism of the past, looking at what one is through the eyes of what one was. But he is also the one who makes clear that the past can only be retrieved as the future. (615)

As a figure of double consciousness, an embodiment of time, a sign of indeterminacy, Reuben is situated in the novel as what Nora calls a lieux de mémoire, or a site of memory, in which "memory crystallizes and secretes itself" so as to enable " a sense of historical continuity" to persist (284). The people of Homewood are drawn to Reuben because he teaches them to access and understand their pasts and presents, their histories and their memories. Like Esu, Reuben rewrites the rules of disclosure and interpretation, which are usually efforts to pin down the facts of a case, and weaves personal and cultural narratives into discourses characterized by multiplicity, dissonance, and possibility (Gates *Signifying* 21).[137]

We do not learn until the end of the novel that Reuben is an impostor—he is not really a lawyer. Rather, he has equipped himself with knowledge of the law and how it works, and assumes his right to 'make and do' what he can for the people in his community by performing a role that relies on certain fictions of its own. One could say that Reuben becomes a victim of his own tactics because he is eventually

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[137] It is interesting in this regard that Wideman likens Reuben's physically deformed body to the law that he negotiates when he describes Reuben as "built funny enough to be pitiable, but not put together quite right either" (1). Accordingly, "the pitiful thing Reuben wasn't was also what he almost was. Which made you careful" (1). Wideman's description of Reuben's physical appearance coheres with the deceptive nature of the law on which Reuben capitalizes in his performances as a lawyer. That is, like Reuben, the pitiful thing about the law was that what it wasn't—a system that worked to make things better for everyone—was also what it almost was—a system designed to provide justice and a better life for everyone.

jailed for impersonating a lawyer. Yet, even his movements within his cell parallel how he negotiates his relationship to the law. Reuben knows that it is important to be aware of the parameters within which he is contained and required to function. He also senses that the "prisoner fashions the mouth that swallows him" (202). That is, on the one hand, as he walks the cell he "verifies its length and width, defines his cell as he measures its limits, makes it real with each set of sixteen steps" (202). His pacing seems to cause the walls to "grow thicker, higher, each time he stops before them and changes direction" (202). On the other hand, he knows that someone built that cell and, like it or not, in so doing issued an invitation to its prisoners to become partners "in the enterprise" (202). The "finishing touch" to the function of a cell is the participation of prisoners in their own containment (202). Although "concrete and steel can't last forever" a prisoner's complicity structures walls that have the potential to endure that long (202).[138] Reuben's awareness of the nature and function of his own containment, then, informs the ways that he gets over. Those ways, as he puts it, are "as much about love as [they are] about hate" (91).[139]

Reuben's tactics for getting over grow out of his view of the law as "a series of steps. Each step depends on the one before it" (16). The purpose of the carefully

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[138] In the 1999 film *The Hurricane*, starring Denzel Washington, the character Rubin 'Hurricane' Carter refuses to provide the "finishing touch" to his own containment by altering his relationship to his cell and his keepers. He demonstrates his resistance to his incarceration by choosing to remain in his cell at all times. As he puts it in the movie, "If punishment consisted of being locked in a cell, then choosing to never leave that cell deprives [the keepers] of that weapon." Likewise, Carter chooses to sleep when other prisoners are awake and remain awake while the others sleep, thus bending time to his own clock.

[139] Reuben's methods and his contention that they are about both love and hate echoes the claim made by Ellison's protagonist in his monologue at the end of *Invisible Man*: "I defend because in spite of all I find that I love. In order to get some of it down I *have* to love. I sell you no phony forgiveness, I'm a desperate man—but too much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost, unless you approach it as much through love as through hate. So I approach it through division. So I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love" (580).

ordered steps is to create a "particular fiction of motion" which traces a "metaphysical passage from disorder to equilibrium, unfair to fair, chaos to order, by establishing . . . due process" (16). Adherence to the steps that create due process produces a system governed by the illusion that "there is motion, progress, results can be reached, the world made a better place for litigants, for all of us" (16). Reuben is keenly aware of the irony of promises of "equilibrium, fairness, and order" (16). He believes that such promises, inherent in the notion of due process, are just names for a particularly perverse kind of chain that "allows you to play on your tether, fools you by expanding your range so you mistake possibility for freedom" (*Reuben* 19). Reuben likens the chain signified by the illusion of possibility to that worn by a guard dog of a local junkyard, who "[s]narls and snaps and leaps and rages all day as if the leash is his problem, as if biting through it would tear down the barbed-wire-topped, heavy-duty chain link fence that would keep him penned no matter how many steel leashes he chews through" (19). Reuben defines himself, therefore, not as an "agency of change," but rather as his "clients' bona fide agent" (198). In his mind that means providing clients with the illusion that they have someone on their side who is tending to their interests (198). He considers himself a provider of "a species of justice" that his clients "seldom receive up the street, around the corner, and down the block in the courthouse" (198). Although he cannot provide his clients with true justice, for the law itself does not provide for its administration—hence the need for an illusion—he can provide them with the "peace of mind which comes from being assured you have an advocate" (198).

Reuben's altruism is informed by his suspicion that "nobody ever escapes" and that possibility is just one of many "boxes within boxes within boxes cutting off your air," and his equally strong suspicion and hopefulness that "[m]aybe no one was in charge. Maybe there was a plan you couldn't count on, but nobody else could either" (20). Thus, his approach is to take advantage of the spaces between the orderly steps constituting the law to "subvert [its] intended motion" (17). His methodology requires that he "study each link of the chain," so as to "break down the process into discrete, manageable units" (17). At the point at which he has successfully undertaken these steps, he sets about "creating a counterillusion" through which he forestalls "an inevitable conclusion by the logic of another conclusion, just as inevitable if the dice were given a slightly different spin" (17). Reuben knows that his tactic, as Certeau says of all tactics, "operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of 'opportunities' and depends on them" but does not develop "any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids. What it wins it cannot keep" (Certeau 37). That Reuben's tactic does not earn him a sanctioned position relative to the law or guarantee his ability to take his clients "where they needed to go" does not mean that he is a victim of his own methodology (17). On the contrary, it merely compels him to constantly develop new and guileful ways of negotiating the terrain of the dominant order. As Wideman puts it with respect to Reuben's tactics, "[y]ou leave it behind you, beneath you, but you don't tell anyone, and no one knows unless they're willing to get down, down, down, stoop to the black-magic tricks you conjure to win the race" (17). In other words, the secret that Reuben knows and that he aims to share with his clients is that to get over, one must

constantly be on the lookout for ways to go underground, so as to maneuver more effectively within the spaces and places of containment that structure African American men's lives.

Wideman juxtaposes the methods by which Reuben endeavors to "win the race," those being exploiting the fictions of law to help clients remember the stories that can make them strong, with the methods by which Wally, a Black man who makes his living recruiting college basketball players, negotiates a white-dominated world. Whereas Reuben exploits the fictions of law through his performances as a lawyer to forge a connection between himself and the members of his community, past and present, Wally teaches himself to "profit from detachment" (99). Reuben believes that one cannot move forward without having access to the past through memory and storytelling. In contrast, Wally relies on memory and storytelling to impose both psychic and geographic distance between himself, his personal experiences, and the Homewood community (99).

When Wally first leaves Homewood to attend university he trusts no one. Indeed, he hates the white people with whom he interacts on campus (109). During his time at school Wally makes an effort to go "along to get along," which often means making changes in the ways that he dresses, talks, and acts in accordance with the expectations of the white people whom he encounters (111). For Wally, the tricky part of 'going along to get along' is determining exactly what is at stake (112). Are those who demand that he change his behavior just dumb and do they treat each other as badly as they treat Wally? (112). Or, do they in fact intend to hurt him to the extent that they do? (112) On the one hand, the changes that he makes so as to better blend

with the university crowd "signified nothing" (111). On the other hand, Wally realizes that the small, seemingly insignificant changes that he makes are "connected to big stuff in . . . treacherous ways" (111). As he points out with regard to so-called social mixers it was clear that the only thing that was being mixed was "Wally's drop of blackness in an ocean of whiteness" and that it is taken for granted that his color would be the one to change (111). His time at university thereby conditions him to function as though he is forever running to fulfill whatever expectations would provide him with an honorary place in the white world. As he puts it, he fears that "if he falls asleep his legs will run him awake again. Remind him they never stop running. He scared them one day into fleeing from blackness, from having nothing, and now they never stop, don't know how to stop" (29).[140] As a consequence of his perpetual running and 'going along to get along' Wally, not unlike Daniels when we first encounter him in Wright's short story, learns to "hate the face in the mirror. . . . hate it for giving in, hate it for not being the right one, hate it for hating itself" (112).

Wally's hatred for his own image leads him to believe that it is easier to 'go along to get along' if he develops a roster of disguises from which he can choose to make the kinds of impressions that different situations require (32). For instance, he likens his collection of disguises to the suitcase which, as a recruiter, he keeps packed with the clothes of "an elegant junior exec, a baggy-tweed assistant prof, a hip cookie just this side of pimp and gangster, college-boy jeans, T-shirt and sandals" (32). Wally uses his disguises to structure his life as a series of unrelated stories to which

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[140] Wally's sense that he is constantly kept running echoes Ellison's invocation of the notion in *Invisible Man* when the protagonist interprets Bledsoe's letter as a directive to its recipients to "hope him to death and keep him running" (194).

he resists any personal connection. Although the disguises represent an important part of the game of fooling people into believing that he has bought into the rules of assimilation, the disguises are also "a pain in the ass because you had to be ready to dress for situations you couldn't always anticipate" (33). His disguises afford him the agency of invisibility by enabling him to blend into settings in which he would otherwise stand out. To Wally, then, getting over requires a willingness to "pretend to be the person you are pretending you want to see" (34). Moreover, although the disguises make his interactions with whites easier at times, he is aware that games of disguise can be played both ways and that there is no way of knowing "how many times he'd been fooled by tricksters who'd sneaked out of their normal skins" (33). Nonetheless, since he can conceive of no better way to get over, he continually dons disguises so as to make impressions that in the end are all "anybody wants to know, to deal with" (34). The joke is that "you can become anything but you must always wear your fate like a badge" (41). In Wally's case, it seems that his fate is to be disconnected from past, present, and future. Such disconnectedness is the inevitable outcome of a life lived as a story whose author claims to have no interest in the ways that it begins and ends.

Wally, however, considers detachment and disconnectedness to be one of the "secrets" that compensate him for living his life in disguise so as to get over (34). Another of his compensatory secrets is the theory that he develops and refers to as a theory of abstract hate (116).[141] The theory is a product of Wally's memories of and

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[141] Wideman addresses similar issues in his earlier novel *The Lynchers* (1973) which tells the story of four African American men who devise a plan to lynch a white police officer. The plan is conceived of by Littleman whose name is significant because his self-imposed limitations undermine his ability to see himself as a man. Littleman believes that, for the act to attract the attention of thinkers who

hatred for the white people who were responsible for the violent deaths of his entire family (116). So painful are Wally's recollections of the events that he cannot bring himself to describe them to Reuben in the first person. He knows that to acknowledge the extent of his hatred towards the white people who killed his family is to allow them to "keep on hurting him" (117). He is therefore faced with a choice between curing himself of his hatred toward those who killed his family, or becoming yet another victim of their crimes (117). The theory, as Wally explains to Reuben, has to do with "[k]illing people and getting away clean" (115). The notion of 'getting away clean' refers both to not being held accountable for committing crimes against whites, and to emancipating oneself from the damaging effects of hate. Wally's clean getaway is complicated by the fact that his hate, which was initially directed towards specific white people, mutates over time into an abstract form, "[i]nvisible but strong enough to choke you to death" (117). As he explains:

> Abstract hate means you don't got nothing against any particular person. You may even like or respect a particular individual but at the same time there's something about that person, 'the white part' you can't ever forgive, never forget. So deep inside you you don't know you're rooting against them. . . . It's a deep hate you can't get over no matter what happens. You can live among them, thrive, love one or two, but you never move beyond the abstract part. It's in your gut and there's righteous cause for it to be there, so it stays there, like a

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concern themselves with history and tradition, it must take the form of a spectacle that is given the status of a formal event, unlike the crude exercises of the white vigilantes of the South. As Littleman puts it, "[w]hen I talk about lynching, I'm talking about power. . . . Power must always be absolute. When it's not absolute it's something weaker, imitating power. . . . You must be prepared to assert your power brutally and arbitrarily if it is to remain pure" (61). To Littleman, the proposed plan to lynch a white police officer signifies nothing unless the men actually carry out their plan. In contrast, Wilkerson, one of the other men, views the lynching plan as a metaphor for the resistance that each man feels and wishes he could mobilize. In short, Littleman sees no potential for everyday acts of resistance to disrupt power relations that he considers to be ordained in a master scheme. (62) What Littleman overlooks and/or gives no credence to are the many other ways that Black men understand and resist their own oppression. Like Wally, Littleman's short-sightedness, in this regard, compromises his ability to understand, to relate to, and to respect other male members of his community, which dooms him to remain in his own eyes a 'little man.'

> sickness, a cancer, unless you root it out. Rooting it out's the hardest part. (116)

Wally concludes that because "he'd been hurt so bad he believed he had a perfect right to try anything to make himself well" (119).[142] His solution, therefore, is to confront his hate and anger on its own terms via a method that is as abstract as the problem. In short, Wally's theory of abstract hate compels him to take "revenge in the abstract, on principle" (117).

As a recruiter, Wally is positioned perfectly to put his theory into practice. Since his job keeps him "hopping from city to city," he can never claim to be a part of the places to which he goes nor those that he leaves (117). His job thereby renders him as abstract, or invisible, as the hate that he feels (117). In other words, when "[y]ou're a floater. People begin to see you that way. Which amounts to not seeing you at all. Invisible" (117). His invisibility creates an irony that is apparent in his exchanges with coaches who chat with him like he's "a white man and like the kid, big, black, and solid as he is standing between them, doesn't hear, doesn't exist" (101). Wally is aware of and resents his complicity with respect to the treatment of young, Black males as commodities during the recruitment process. Indeed, as he sees it, his job bears a disturbing resemblance to that of a slave trader. That resemblance is apparent in the language that coaches use to market their athletes. For instance, as the coaches show Wally their "prize stud," they compliment, as they appraise the recruit "pound for pound, attribute by attribute—springs in his legs, big long arms like his daddy, and strong, scares his own teammates in practice. A hard

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[142] Wally's position resembles that which Daniels entertains in "The Man Who Lived Underground" prior to ascending into the aboveground world in his effort to achieve fellowship with whites.

worker too. Jump through a brick wall if I say jump. Bid em in. Bid em in" (100). Accordingly, Wally occasionally makes efforts to connect with the young Black recruits through a glance that says, "I'm on your side, my man. We both know this dude's a clown, but we can laugh at him, too, can't we?" (101). Despite his efforts, however, it seems that Wally is invisible to the recruits and he is rarely rewarded with even so much as "a wink, a nod, a shucking and jiving glint of intelligence in dark eyes that are mirrors of his own" (101). As he knows to be the case with his own anger, hurt, and hate, Wally concludes that the recruits have buried their emotions "so deep he can't coax them out," thus leaving Wally and the Black recruits as invisible to and disconnected from each other as is Wally to the coaches with whom he deals (101). Although Wally's disconnectedness situates him ideally to release abstract hate through abstract crimes, his theory leads him to use memory to unwittingly commit an abstract crime that renders him alone and invisible, and thus his own victim.

Wally believes that if he reimagines his life as a distant memory he will no longer have to contend with residual feelings of hate from traumatic and humiliating events (102). As he puts it, "[s]ince the shit was already over, since it had gone down the way it was going to go down, like it or not, he would treat what he was doing as if it was happening to someone else" (102). However, just as Wally's disguises structure his life as stories that can take him neither backward nor forward, so too his approach to life as though it were a memory leaves him similarly contained in a seemingly interminable present. On the one hand, as Wally recognizes, viewing life as a memory has the potential to produce healing effects. In Wally's case, it enables him to replay traumatic events differently and to pretend that they happened to

someone else. By using his memory to alter the ways that events transpired, Wally creates a mental space in which he is free to explore different responses to the events (102). For instance, within that mental space, he can choose to "[s]tand way back. Be sorry for the sucker. Laugh at him. No sense in worrying. Too late." (102) Theoretically, then, by distancing himself from the first-person narrative of his life, Wally can deny the psychic effects of events that keep him running. On the other hand, the distance that he creates by approaching his memories from the perspective of a man once removed from his experiences distorts both the authentic image of himself for which he is searching and his sense of belonging in both Black and white communities. That is, this use of memory distorts how Wally sees himself and his life, as did his practice of 'going along to get along' while attending university, and his participation in the game of disguises as a professional. These damaging effects thus undermine his theory that abstract crimes are "not personal since what you're really doing is working on the biggest problem: the abstract hate. That's what you're really killing" (118). Thus, when Wally uses memory to cast someone else in his life's principal role, he effectively kills the same man—himself—whom he is attempting to liberate from the bonds of abstract hate.

The degree to which Wally's uses of stories and memory fail him is also evident in the story that he relates to Reuben when he is explaining the notion of abstract hate. It is never completely clear whether the incident that Wally describes actually took place or whether it is a fantasy that he constructs to relieve the burden of hate that he carries within him.[143] Whatever the case, he relates the details of the

[143] The people in Homewood remember how, when Reuben originally undertook to help them with their legal problems, he towed the trailer that he used for an office and a home behind his Buick (6).

incident to Reuben as he remembers them. As Wally puts it to Reuben, "since it's my story, they'll have to do, Reuben. When you tell it you can jazz it up any way you'd like" (42). As Wally's version of the story goes, he encounters a man in an airport restroom. The man is "Caucasian. Middle-aged. Unlucky" (42). When Wally enters the restroom the white man does a "subtle double take" that makes Wally feel "for a second like a roach" (43). He resists the urge "to scurry away, return to his proper element" (43). The white man, however, "either decides against pissing in Wally's presence or knows better than to soil this kind of public bathroom with human waste" because he goes directly to the marble-topped sinks and washes his hands (43). Wally ponders for a moment whether one is supposed to wash one's hands prior to using the toilet, in which case, since "[h]e'd never tried it or considered it," he supposes that the white man has one up on him in terms of *men's* room etiquette (43). He then wonders, sarcastically, if the reversal is just another example of the ways in which Blacks and whites are different. As Wally knows all too well, there are "[l]ots of areas of human experience about which they'd profoundly disagree. Rights and privileges and priorities. Even in a bog this large the two of them competed for space when there was space for fifty" (43). Whatever those differences, Wally imagines that the white man whose hair was "barbered to a precise fringe about stiff, white collar" might well have been a hippie twenty years ago and that they might then have "shared a toke or two, laughed, lied, scandalized a couple of three-piece-suited dinosaurs who came to

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The members of the community learn that when they need Reuben they can count on him to "come like a turtle or some damned something his whole house dragging behind him" (6). Reuben undertakes the role of a lawyer out of hate for the injustices to which he and others are subject, and out of love for his community. In contrast, Wally carries with him only abstract hate that distances him from his community, divides him in the same ways that he as a recruiter "will split the kid down the middle, from his guzzle to his zorch. Leave some, take some back to the university. Sever this boy and release

scrub their webbed paws and caught them in the act" (43). He feels a twinge of regret when he knocks the man unconscious with a single karate chop with his hand, "drags him by the scruff of the neck to a stall," and drowns him in the toilet (43). Nonetheless, he makes a point of submerging the man's head gently, with little splashing, in the toilet bowl, thus patterning himself on the delicate manner in which the man had washed his hands (44). Having used the toilet, albeit to drown the white man, Wally then dries his own hands and neatly disposes of the paper towels in the proper receptacle before exiting the men's room.

When Wally finishes relating the incident to Reuben, Reuben asks him if the story is true. Wally does not answer. Rather, it occurs to him at that moment that the man might just as well have been invisible since he "doesn't think he ever really saw the man's face" (44). The image that he remembers was simply "a pinkish blur expressing its disapproval of Wally before Wally could register its features" (44). Nonetheless, as Wally reimagines the moment, "an image of the man's startled face" becomes part of his memory (44). The startled image makes no sense to Wally given that he had given the man no warning prior to knocking him unconscious. Wally therefore begins to question whose reflection he remembers in the mirror. Was it his own dark face or was it the man's white one? Or was it an "image of dying or guilt or just a flash of light billowing in from the streets as walls collapsed around them and the building disappeared and the city disappeared," leaving only Wally "dreaming the death clash of two puppets on a bare stage" (45)? Perhaps the image that Wally sees is "a flash of light," generated in one of the rare moments when two men, one white

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a ghost that will spend its days floating back and forth between two places, two bodies, never able to call either one home" (107).

and one Black, come face to face with themselves and with each other, while the ideological and material signifiers that structure their hierarchical relationship are momentarily elided from the picture. In such a moment, it would stand to reason that the image that Wally remembers as one of "dying or guilt" might be the reflection of Wally, or the white man, or both. Despite Wally's conviction that acts of revenge taken "in the abstract, on principle" take no prisoners, the troubling ambiguity of the reflections, or memories, with which his story leaves him to reckon suggests otherwise (117). Wally's theory of abstract hate, the stories that it generates, and his uses of memory fail, then, because none leaves him with an image of himself as a man whose performances arise from a core of respect for himself, for his Blackness, and for his community.

Although Wally grasps some of the limitations of his own theory and of his use of stories and memory, he remains unwilling, or perhaps unable, to imagine functioning outside the parameters that they delineate. His awareness of those limitations becomes apparent during a debate with Reuben. The two men argue about whether, by committing the murder, Wally has freed himself from the abstract hate that plagues him. Wally's claim to freedom is compromised by his admission that even the idea that he might have killed a white man "keeps me jumping. Keeps me from being where I want to be. Keeps me awake at night. Keeps me running" (200). Certainly, as both he and Reuben note, he would not be the first Black man to be lynched for thinking about murdering a white man (200). From Reuben's point of view, however, it is not possible for Wally to be free without understanding and/or acknowledging the nature and function of his story about committing the murder. In

contrast to his usual employment of memory, Wally insists that he has nothing to gain by returning to the scene of the crime, either literally or in his mind, to determine the degree of truth that informs his recollection of the incident. As he puts it, "Why I need to know? I got away with it. Whatever *it* was. Killing one. Or dreaming of killing one. They owed me one at least. The thought that I might have collected makes me feel real good sometimes" (200, original emphasis). To Wally, in other words, searching for the truth—'whatever *it* was'—involves certain risks that he is simply not prepared to take. Reuben undercuts Wally's efforts to let the story stand on the grounds that "[m]aybe it's all in my mind," with a gentle reminder that a Black man's mind may be the worst place for a story of that nature to be (199). That the story has become just one of many things that keep Wally running suggests that Reuben is correct.

Reuben views memory not as an instrument through which to escape one's past, but rather as "a voice, a voice like God's, sure of itself, alone, unimpeachable," that functions as a guide to the past and shows people how to "capture and understand its meaning" so as to find better ways in the future (14). In contrast, Wally sees memory as a method by which to erase and/or rewrite the narratives of the past so as to make it easier to get over in the present. Reuben eventually concedes that it may be too late for Wally to sort out the facts and fictions of the various narratives that he relies on both to dictate the chapters of his life and to 'get over' (201). At the same time, Reuben holds fast to his belief that "the past lives in us. There must be ways we can change things. Make them better" (201). Whereas Reuben is prepared to act on his faith that there might be ways to make things better for everyone, Wally holds fast

to his position that he "ain't risking his neck on no *might*" (201, original emphasis). As he puts it, "[g]uilty or not. I wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance. They'd waste me either way. You know I'm talking truth Reuben" (201). In response, Reuben contends that the truth is "less than enough. It won't set us free. We need more. Truth just starts the wheels turning. There's more . . . we need more than truth to save us now" (201). It is clear that what Reuben terms "abstract guilt" is a residual effect of Wally's theory of abstract hate and his unwillingness to use memory and storytelling for emancipatory purposes.[144] As such, even though it is Reuben who is in prison at the end of the novel, in very significant ways he is freer than Wally. Unlike Wally, Reuben is unprepared to respect the walls that structure the prison-writ-large for Black men in the United States. When Wally declares adamantly that he will not return to the scene of the crime, in any way, shape, or form, and insists instead that he will stay home, Reuben responds sardonically by commenting that home is where "we all belong, I suppose. In our bottles with the caps screwed on tight. . . . Till someday somebody comes along and rubs the glass. The magic touch setting our magic free" (201). The sardonic tone of Reuben's response stems from his knowledge that it is often left to the person inside the "bottle" either to conceive of a way out or to find ways to function with as much dignity and agency as possible within. In Reuben's case, he goes one step beyond taking responsibility for his own emancipation through his commitment to the people of the Homewood community. His performances as a lawyer are the product of his unwillingness to confine himself to the spaces designated as appropriate 'homes' for Black males. As a bona fide agent

[144] Wideman's invocation of the notion of 'abstract guilt' to conceptualize Wally's containment functions similarly to Wright's analysis of the nature and function of Daniels' guilt in "The Man Who

for his clients, Reuben considers one of his most important responsibilities to be helping them reconnect with what their stories and memories mean to and for them even as they are being distorted within hegemonic structures such as the legal system. In so doing, Reuben hopes that his clients might find within themselves the magic that will allow them to rub their own glasses and set themselves free.

VI

By way of conclusion, I turn briefly to Ernest Gaines' novel *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) which, like Wideman's and Wright's work, emphasizes the centrality of double vision, memory, and storytelling as the methods that African American men employ to get over in their everyday lives. In Gaines' novel, the old Black men, like Daniels in Wright's story and Reuben in Wideman's, not to mention the writers who created them, collectively employ such methods to disrupt, albeit temporarily, a power structure that functions effectively so long as the subjects whom it seeks to oppress exist in a state characterized by invisibility, silence, and disconnectedness from their past. *A Gathering of Old Men* is set in Louisiana in 1979 and tells the story of a group of elderly, Black men who complicate the local Sheriff's investigation of the murder of a white man by each claiming to have committed the murder. Every man arrives at the scene with the same type of weapon with which the deceased was killed, and each relates a story that suggests he had a plausible motive. In every case, the teller of the story describes an incident in which he or a member of his family was treated cruelly and unfairly by other whites. The stories prove that each man has a motive and anger enough to kill a white man. At what is arguably the most poignant moment in the novel, Gaines brings the men's narratives together to make clear both

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Lived Underground."

the disparities between African American and white ways of seeing (or not seeing) and remembering the past, and the manner in which the former employ storytelling to make their voices heard and to mobilize the liberating potential of double vision and memory.

At this point in the novel, Jacob Aguillard claims to have killed the white man because, as he tells Mapes, the white sheriff, "I remember what that crowd did to my sister" (87). Mapes, without bothering to inquire as to what exactly a crowd did to Jacob's sister, replies "I see" as he looks at Jacob standing before him (87). As Mapes and Jacob stare at each other, other men issue their claims to have committed the murder. In response to each of their claims, Mapes replies again, "I see" (88). Finally, Johnny Paul informs Mapes loudly that, in fact, he sees nothing (88). As Johnny Paul makes this declaration, he casts his gaze into the distance towards "the quarters where his mama and papa used to stay" (88). Johnny Paul directs Mapes' attention to the same spot and asks him to state exactly what it is that he sees. Mapes replies that he sees only weeds. Johnny Paul is not surprised as he tells Mapes, "Yes, sir, I figured that's all you would see" (88). He then turns to the Black men who have gathered and queries, "But what do the rest don't see? What y'all don't see?" (88) When Mapes protests that he does not have time to listen to people telling him about "what they can't or don't see," Johnny Paul looks "dead at Mapes" as though through the eyes of the ancestors and proceeds to remember for himself and for the other men gathered and, on the off chance that it might matter, for Mapes, exactly what it is that Mapes "don't see" (88):

> "*Remember*?" he said. "When they wasn't no weeds—*remember*? *Remember* how they used to sit out there on the garry—Mama, Papa,

> Aunt Clara, Aunt Sarah, Unc Moon, Aunt Spoodle, Aunt Thread. *Remember*? Everybody had flowers in the yard. But nobody had four-o'-clocks like Jack Toussaint. Every day at four o'clock, they opened up just as pretty. *Remember*?" . . . "That's why I kilt him, that's why," Johnny Paul said. "To protect them little flowers. But they ain't here no more. And how come? 'Cause Jack ain't here no more. He's back there under them trees with all the rest. With Mama and Papa, Aunt Thread, Aunt Spoodle, Aunt Clara, Unc Moon, Unc Jerry—all the rest of them. But y'all do *remember*, don't y'all?" (88-89 emphasis added)

For the various reasons that each man's story suggests, they most certainly do remember. As the men remember and retell their stories in the context of the murder investigation, they, like Daniels who discovers the possibilities of a doubly-conscious perspective, and like Reuben who seeks to redress histories of exclusion and oppression by intervening in the spaces between the orderly steps of the law, are propelled, albeit briefly, into the field of visibility from which Mapes and the worldview that he represents excludes them. The men thereby worry the boundaries of official spaces within which their blackness would normally render them invisible.

Aside from Daniels and Wally, none of these fictional men rely on their doubly-conscious perspectives to uphold any illusions about the broader implications or long-term effects of the methods by which they get over. Rather, memory and storytelling function for them as means by which both to make heard and to celebrate the sounds of their own voices and those of the ancestors whose lives they remember. The efficacy of their methods arises from the willingness of each to contextualize his life and experiences in relation to others through dialogue with them. Dialogue, however, may take a form other than a conversation between people living in the same moment. That is, as Reuben understands it, the form of memory itself resembles a conversation in which "[t]wo, at most three or four earnest, compatible souls

[engage] in compassionate dialogue" (Wideman *Reuben* 14). Most significant about the stories that arise from dialogue of this nature is that "no one [is] in charge. No host, no writer, no master of ceremonies" (Wideman *Reuben* 14). Thus, although memory and storytelling may not alter the lives of the people who do the remembering and telling, the forms function in other ways that are emancipatory for the Black men who employ them in their daily lives.

The Black male writers whose work has been the focus of this chapter are outstanding at tapping the fecund well of the everyday through the lives of the Black male characters who populate their texts, thus transporting the characters into more visible realms through fiction. Paule Marshall, in her essay, "The Making of a Writer: From the Poets in the Kitchen" (1983), posits that "the proper measure of a writer's talent is skill in rendering everyday speech—when it is appropriate to the story—as well as the ability to tap, to exploit, the beauty, poetry and wisdom it often contains" (3). Further, she contends, "[c]ommon speech and the plain, workaday words that make it up are, after all, the stock in trade of some of the best fiction writers" (3). Although none of the characters in Wideman's, Wright's, or Gaines' fiction do what poets are supposed to do, that is, "spend their days in an attic room writing verses," the narratives through which they remember the best and worst aspects of their lives are informed by the rhythms of the everyday—presence and absence, anger and appeasement, chaos and peace, grief and glory, love and hate, life and death (Marshall 4). Although each writer yearns to better understand his life and those of other men and women, Black and white, none is driven by the arrogance of a wish to "pin down" what those lives mean, either to the people who live them or to those who

remember them (Morrison "Lecture" 20). In this regard, I view them as masters when it comes to exploiting what Toni Morrison refers to in her Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech as the vitality of language that stems from "its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers" (20).

Elsewhere, Morrison reminds us that writers have at their disposal "only the letters of the alphabet and some punctuation" ("Rootedness" 341). Accordingly, she contends, although it is the writer's job to use those devices to "provide the places and spaces so that the readers can participate" in the construction of the narrative, the pages might as well be blank if readers do not venture willingly into the partnership (341). The most skilled writers, a group in which I include Wideman, Wright and Gaines, as well as Walker, Marshall and Morrison, demand no less of their readers. Those of us who, like Reuben, persist in the belief that there "must be ways we can change things" and "[m]ake them better," can begin by reading African American men's narratives, in the various forms that we encounter them, with the goals of understanding both the context of a particular course of action, and respecting what particular actions mean to the actors themselves (Wideman *Reuben* 201, Johnson and McCuskery xix). To read with such goals in mind is to acknowledge and to make visible the many facets of the everyday that are often overlooked in discussions of image, cultural power, and survival strategies, and to take seriously Walker's point that "*the notion of song*" may be far more important than whether or not the 'song' manifests in an audible, recognizable for(u)m (Johnson and McCuskery, Walker 237, original emphasis).

Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation I have argued that, for African American men, the United States functions as a prison-writ-large. I have discussed the nature and function of particular forms of containment to which African American men are subject by focusing on figures, both 'real' and 'fictional,' whose containment arises from the hypervisibility and/or invisibility, silence, and violence wrought by hegemonic representations of Black men. I have approached the figures as enigmatic texts that demand to be recognized and to be read on their own terms. I have attempted to give each text room to speak by attempting to 'hear' what they have to say in ways many of them have been denied in other contexts. I have not done so, however, without risk. As I suggested in the conclusion to Chapter Four, the practice of close reading necessarily involves the participation of a party external to the text in the construction of its meaning. In this case, that party happens to be a white, female Ph.D. student who is, no less, Canadian. I am cognizant of the fact that these factors may have affected my readings of the texts and that, however careful I have been to avoid doing so, I may have abused my prerogative as a reader to determine what a text means, or is meant, to say.

Houston Baker, in "Scene . . . Not Heard," calls our attention to historical abuses of such prerogative with respect to slave experiences and slave narratives in ways that resonate with my concern here. Baker refers to an instance when a slave master killed one of his slaves and was asked to account for the death. The master's explanation was that "if one slave refused to be corrected, and escaped with his life, the other slaves would soon copy the example; the result of which would be, the

freedom of the slaves, and the enslavement of the whites" (Baker 39). Baker reads the master's testimony as a powerful reassertion of his fear that to recognize a slave's "'uncorrected' right to speech or action" was to risk becoming enslaved himself (Baker 39). He also notes the conspicuous silence of the slave which functioned as a reminder of the fact that "it was unthinkable for a black person to offer testimony against any white act whatsoever" (39). Further, Baker notes, "even when blacks were permitted to tell their stories, the *interpretation* of their narratives—no matter how effective a slave's oratory—was the exclusive prerogative of their white-abolitionist employers" (40, original emphasis). The solution that Baker offers to readers who wish not to exploit their interpretive agency is to "[p]ipe to the spirit ditties of no tone" so as to, first, acknowledge that much is said between the lines, and, second, to engage as effective readers in the hermeneutical practice of "*overhearing*" (41). In the case of slave narratives specifically, Baker contends "what is overheard by effective readers is a lyrical repudiation of the master's exclusive right to meaningful being in the world" (41). My effort throughout this dissertation has been to "overhear" my primary texts so as to make audible assertions that have been silenced within racialized scenes of American violence.

Accordingly, I have focused on some of the ways that African American men resist subjection within the prison-writ-large. My discussions of specific sites and forms of African American men's containment and resistance have been informed by Alice Walker's invocation of the notion of "contrary instincts" in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Walker reminds us of Virginia Woolf's assertion that a gifted woman born centuries ago "would have been so thwarted and hindered by contrary

instincts . . . that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty" (235). Walker argues that evidence of "contrary instincts" is apparent through the tradition of African American women's writing (235-236). As a case in point, she discusses Phillis Wheatley's work in which, Walker claims, "evidence of 'contrary instincts' is everywhere. Her loyalties were divided, as was, without question, her mind" (236). Such instincts underlay, for example, Wheatley's poetic construction of liberty in the form of a golden-haired goddess which "held Phillis up to ridicule for more than a century" and "is usually read prior to hanging Phillis's memory as that of a fool" (Walker 236).[145] Walker attributes Wheatley's "contrary instincts" to the fact that she was "[c]aptured at seven, a slave of wealthy, doling whites who instilled in her the 'savagery' of the Africa they 'rescued' her from" (236). On behalf of critics who responded to Wheatley in such ways, Walker issues an apology to her when she writes: "We know now that you were not an idiot or a traitor; only a sickly little black girl, snatched from your home and country and made a slave; a woman who still struggled to sing the song that was your gift, although in a land of barbarians who praised you for your bewildered tongue" (237). Walker's apology to Wheatley stems from her recognition of the ways that Wheatley's life experiences, along with the historically contradictory social, economic, cultural, and political organization of the United States, informed the contradictions apparent in the poems through which she expressed her worldviews. Implicit in Walker's apology is a critique of responses to contemporary cultural productions, behaviors, and experiences of African Americans

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[145] Henry Louis Gates argues that the "peculiar history of Wheatley's reception by critics has, ironically enough, largely determined the theory of the criticism of the creative writings of Afro-Americans from the eighteenth century to the present time" (*Figures* 79).

that do not reflect a similar sensitivity to the possibility that they too may be informed by "contrary instincts." It seems to me, therefore, that it is worth taking note of Walker's critique in the context of African American men's often bewildering cultural productions and equally bewildering self-representations.

That is, Black men's ways of seeing, being seen, and making themselves heard in the contemporary United States are clearly informed by "contrary instincts" that are frequently overlooked or employed as grounds for dismissal of the import of their work in both academic and nonacademic forums. Yet, just as they did in Wheatley's case, these "contrary instincts" inflect Black men's work in ways that inspire critical responses with the potential to be as damaging as those for which Walker apologizes. Indeed, the question that critics have cynically asked of Wheatley—"How could she?"—is asked of Black men whose behavior and cultural productions deviate from a deceptively linear and obtusely marked path to resistance, change, equality and freedom. "How could they?" is asked of Black prisoners whose criminal actions are taken as a reflection of a criminal essence. "How could they?" is asked of rap artists who seem at times to victimize themselves through purportedly resistant language and actions that seem only to degrade themselves and other members of their communities. "How could they?" is asked of professional Black athletes who violate the rules of the many different 'games' in which, as both Black men and athletes, they are forced players. "How could they" is asked of Black workingmen who bend their lives, if not their views of themselves and their lives, to fit the hegemonic parameters within which they have learned to get by from day to day. I cannot help but wonder if it is not wiser, more astute, more critically

productive, and more compassionate to approach the evidence of "contrary instincts" in Black men's lives and cultural productions, as does Walker of Wheatley, with the questions "How could they not?" and, "Since they did, what of it?" That is, given the degree to which distorted images of African American males inform "the workings of the national psyche," is it not reasonable to expect that Black men's work as artists and athletes and workingmen will be itself laden with contradictions, will create further contradictions, and will sometimes seem as distorted as the contexts out of which it arises (Johnson and McCuskery xix)? And if such expectations are unreasonable, then is it not worthwhile for critics to direct attention to "overhearing" what is being said in and around the rough edges delineated by contrary instincts?

Ralph Ellison, in his essay "The Little Man at Chehaw Station: The American Artist and His Audience" (*Going to the Territory* 1986), offers a paradigm within which to envision the resultant critical scenario. Ellison begins that essay by relating an incident that took place when he was a music student at Tuskegee Institute in the 1930s. After a less-than-stellar trumpet performance before a panel of faculty members Ellison sought comfort from another of his teachers, Miss Hazel Harrison. Instead of offering him sympathy, however, Miss Harrison gently admonished Ellison by reminding him that, "you must *always* play your best, even if it's only in the waiting room at Chehaw Station, because in this country there'll always be a little man hidden behind the stove" (4, original emphasis). Although he is initially frustrated by Miss Harrison's offer of a riddle in lieu of sympathy, Ellison eventually conceptualizes "the little man at Chehaw Station" as "the enigma of aesthetic communication in American democracy" (6). The "little man," he explains,

represents the characteristics of a cultural production—and I would add of an experience, a behavior, a representation, a story, a memory—that makes it possible, indeed, necessary for critics, as well as consumers, academics, policy makers, to engage with any of these forms in the spirit of "antagonistic cooperation; acting, for better or worse, as both collaborator and judge" (7). The enigmatic quality of a form appeals to the audience's experiences and emotions, on the one hand, to make them sympathetic to those of the artist while, on the other hand, leaving room for the audience to reckon with the art form (7). The "little man" thereby inducts into the critical realm what Ellison calls "new dimensions of artistic truth" (7). Whereas the chaos that the "little man" has the potential to precipitate risks being condemned "as a source of confusions, a threat to social order, and a reminder of the unfinished details" of the United States, it remains an integral component of the "American scene and language" that "goads its users toward a perfection of our revolutionary ideals" (8).

The realization of "revolutionary ideals" is complicated by the clever irony underlying Miss Harrison's association of a metaphor as complex as the "little man" with Chehaw Station, a simple "whistle-stop," on the one hand, and "a point of arrival and departure for people representing a wide diversity of tastes and styles of living," on the other (15). The ironic locus of the "little man" leads Ellison to argue that "the mystery of American cultural identity contained in such motley mixtures arises out of our persistent attempts to reduce our cultural diversity to an easily recognizable unity" (15-16). In a much broader context than Walker, Ellison calls attention to the ways that, in the United States, "contrary instincts" function as a major impetus to

efforts to ameliorate the unease that accompanies diversity. Such efforts take the form of contests of civility, piety, and tradition that Ellison views as the "improvised moral equivalent for armed warfare" and that take forms such as wars of words, clashes of style, or the designation of victims as scapegoats (16). As Ellison puts it, "[w]e stand, as we say, united in the name of these sacred principles. But, indeed, it is in the name of these same principles that we ceaselessly contend, affirming our ideals even as we do them violence" (17). Ellison fears that such conflicts could forever stand in place of less violent, more viable modes of coexisting in a nation founded on abstract ideals and principles. But for the reliable, albeit disturbing, presence of the "little man," Ellison's fears would seem well founded.

The "little man" reminds us that there are multiple dimensions to such contests. As concerted as are efforts to resolve through oppression the unease apparent in the "contrary instincts" that structure racial hierarchies in the United States, so are the efforts to mobilize that unease in the form of emancipatory paradigms. My concern throughout this dissertation has been to explore texts through which Black men have undertaken the challenge of the latter. The question with which I am left at the end of the day, or the end of the dissertation as it were, is whether it is possible to claim that any of the texts to which I have directed my attention are revolutionary. Once again, I look to an essay by Alice Walker for an answer to my question. Walker, in her essay "Duties of the Black Revolutionary Artist," contends that, in an ideal world, Black artists would be able to "shut themselves up somewhere away from all debates about who they are and what color they are and just turn out paintings and poems and stories and novels" (133). For my

purposes here, I would add that in an ideal world Black people would be able to make music, or play sports, or go to work and return home each day without having to think about who they are or what color they are. However, the racial organization of the United States denies such freedom in ways that make it necessary for African Americans to be constantly on the lookout for "*what is Bull and what is Truth,* what is practical and what is designed ultimately to paralyze [their] talents" (Walker 133-134, original emphasis). To undertake, in whatever form, searches for what is bull, what is truth, and what constitutes a trap is, I think, to lay the foundation for revolution. And just what exactly is revolution?

According to Walker, revolutions are concerned with "*the least glamorous stuff*" such as making history more accessible by rewriting its narratives in a simpler form or reciting them orally (135, original emphasis). Revolutions look backward as well as forward so as to remember the lessons, deeds, misdeeds, and images of yesterday in forms that resonate today while gesturing hopefully toward tomorrow (135). Arguably most important, revolutions do not rely on artists for flattery, but rather they rely on representations of men and women as they are (137). As Walker explains, "[a] man's life can rarely be summed up in one word; even if that word is black or white. . . . One should recall that Bigger Thomas was many great and curious things, but he was neither good nor beautiful. He was real, and that is sufficient" (137).[146] Walker's assertion leads me to wonder if I may have found the answer to my question.

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[146] The 'real,' Walker asserts, "is what is happening. What is real is what did happen. What happened to me and happens to me is most real of all" (138). Throughout this essay, Walker refers to the artist as 'he' until the last line of the essay which reads: "The artist then is the voice of the people, but she is

At the heart of revolution is the "little man at Chehaw Station" who mediates the transition of abstract, ideal principles from their symbolic forms to forms that enact and sometimes mobilize social actions (Ellison 17). Those social actions accord with ideals that, in turn, "insist upon being made flesh," thus spurring the artist, the prisoner, the musician, the athlete, the workingman, and countless others to find ways to make those ideals "ever more manifest in the structures and processes of [themselves] and of our society" (Ellison 17-18). John Edgar Wideman. Richard Wright. Ernest Gaines. Ice Cube. Rodney King. Tupac Shakur. Latrell Sprewell. Dennis Rodman. Fred Daniels. Reuben. Wally. Revolutionaries all? Not because they dream of demolishing the prison-writ-large. Not because they speak the unspeakable so that we might see the unseeable. Not because they attempt to change the rules that govern play on the inside. Not even because some of them died trying. But perhaps, evidence of "contrary instincts" notwithstanding, each is a revolutionary because, under the tutelage of the "little man," he shows us, in great and curious ways, how to spot the truths, the bull, and the traps that inhabit the mundane. And perhaps each is a revolutionary because he directs us also to the "little man" who leads those willing to follow into the lower frequencies of their lives, their stories, their songs, their games, their memories, and even their deaths, where everything that we see and hear is real, even if it is not good or beautiful. It is real because it may have affected the person who exposes it. It is real because other people have been affected by it. It is real because the forms through which the person does the exposing are themselves real. And that is sufficient to warrant serious critical attention that is clarified by hindsight

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also The People" (138). Although she does not explain her sudden shift, it is in keeping with the other acts of feminist recovery that she undertakes through the volume.

concerning past responses to African American lives, and literary and cultural productions, and that benefits from our knowledge, appreciation, and consideration of the degree to which the objects of our attention may be underscored by "contrary instincts."

In Wheatley's case, temporal distance contributed to critical blind spots in the reception of her work. Today, other kinds of distance between critics, academics, policy makers, and the contemporary African American male experience—social, cultural, economic, geographic, racial, gendered—pose risks to our ability to overhear, as Baker puts it, the effects of "contrary instincts" on Black men's worldviews and the mediums through which they express them. These other kinds of distance leave open the door for cultural and critical responses to Black men's behaviors, activities, performances, and cultural productions every bit as violent as those once directed to Wheatley's work. I have borne such risks in mind as I have attempted, for better or worse, to do some business with the "little man" in each chapter. After all, it was the "little man" who led me to study containment and resistance in African American men's lives and representations of them in the first place. The "little man" guided me, inspired me even, as I sought, through close readings of Wideman's, Wright's, and Tupac's work, and representations of Sprewell and Rodman, to see and hear "order in apparent cultural chaos" (Ellison 23). The "little man" guided me as I set out to find my way to the 'real' men whom I expected eventually to locate behind various forms of "aesthetic gesturing" (Ellison 23). In the end, however, it was the "little man" who showed me that what I was looking for all along, the "essence" of the works on which I've focused, was to be found, not in the

often "comic clashing of styles, but in the mixture, the improvised form, the willful juxtaposition of modes" that kept me engaged throughout (Ellison 23-24). Thus, as Wideman says of Reuben, as complicated as it may be to react responsibly and nonviolently to experiences, and cultural productions that look like someone has deliberately thrown in "shit that makes no sense at all and just [left] you to deal with it," it is integral that we look closely at whatever it is about them that keeps us coming back (*Reuben* 35).

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